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ANIME | MANGA | GAMING

**JOJO's BIZARRE
ADVENTURE:
STONE OCEAN**

CAGED HEAT!

PLATINUM END
HEAVEN HELP US!

NEEDLESS
THE BIG BRAWL!

IRODUKU
EVERY PICTURE TELLS
A STORY!

DIGIMON GHOST GAME
IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL!

ANIME REVIEWS

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editorial

We Are Stop the Attack

Hey! This is Patrick and hey! Welcome to the new issue of *Otaku USA* magazine! Once again, it is our duty to bring you the best in anime, manga, gaming, cosplay, and all manner of fun stuff from Japan that we can fit in our pages. If you are new to our publication, consider yourself officially part of our gang! If you are a regular around these parts, or better yet, part of the elite team of shock commandos known as "subscribers," then welcome back to the funhouse that you help to support!

So, what do you have in store for you this time? Well ... the boisterous and colorful anime known as *Needless* gets our cover slot this time, and writer Brittany Vincent is here to throw punches and dodge a few power blasts along the way to bring you her take. Up next, Daryl Surat puts on a guard's uniform and braves the best the women-in-prison genre can throw at him while penning a feature on *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean*. Then, Kara Dennison straps on a pair of kaleidoscope eyes and shows us around *Irooku: The World in Colors*. Following that, Michael Goldstein makes an argument for the considerable merits of what *Digimon Ghost Game* has to offer. And finally, Brittany Vincent strikes back with the post-Death Note guardian angel follies of *Platinum End!* Whew!

In between these big brawny features, you'll find our usual departments chock-full of anime, manga, and game reviews, a gallery of cosplay pics, manga samples, even live-action film reviews featuring a giant turtle with rockets in his pockets!

So what else is going on? Well ... right now as you sit reading this, it is late January in Japan. I'm originally from California, where the sun always shines and it feels like we have roller skates permanently affixed to our feet, so I always tend to forget how super-duper cold it can get here in Tokyo this time of year. It even snowed all day about a week or so back, which apparently hasn't happened in a few years. I haven't been to the movies in a while, but the *Jujutsu Kaisen* O feature film opened about a month ago and is the One Big Thing happening in anime right this second. I've included a pic on this page as if to prove it!

Aside from that, I have been working on various projects, including this very issue of *Otaku USA*! Meanwhile, my next book, *Crunchyroll Essential Anime: Fan Favorites, Memorable Masterpieces, and Cult Classics*, is set to come out soon in April 2022. The publisher describes it as "an indispensable guide for anime lovers and fans, offering an entertaining and moving narrative about anime's true impact on pop culture," so I sincerely hope you will check it out. And finally, I am working with some Japanese creators on a new mecha-themed project, so hopefully that will wind up being something I can share more info about with you real soon!

Finally, *Otaku USA* is creeping up on our next anniversary: our upcoming August 2022 issue will mark the beginning of our 15th year of publishing. I can't believe how fast time flows (and where does it go?), but it appears we've been doing this mag for a fairly sizeable chunk of time now! This may seem last-minute, but if anyone wants to shoot us some b-day wishes, fond memories, or even what we could be doing better, by all means, send us an email at otakuusa@gmail.com and we'll try and get it in the magazine!

In the meantime, enjoy the new issue of *Otaku USA*!

—Patrick



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LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hello Otaku USA! I hope you had a great year! Man, sekai series have EXPLODED these last couple of years, haven't they? They've been around for a while, but WOW they're going into overdrive lately. Just yesterday I got into a new series called *Life with an Ordinary Guy who Reincarnated into a Total Fantasy Knockout* (man that's a mouthful). Why is isekai so popular today, and can you do an article on this or put a picture of this series in the letters page?

Thanks,
-Jason

Hi Jason! Thanks for your message and for your curiosity about the current isekai anime boom. As you probably know, anime set in another world or fantasy realms have been around for ages now, going all the way back to the 1980s and 1990s with pioneering titles like *Super Dimension Century Orguss* and *The Vision of Escaflowne*. But the modern isekai boom with all its gamer-friendly tropes like XP and leveling-up seems to have been kicked off by the success of the *Sword Art Online* light novel, which became an anime series in 2012 (Holy Toledo, that's 10 years ago!). The *SAO* anime was such a big hit that helped make the isekai genre bigger than ever, bringing us up to today and crazy titles like *Life with an Ordinary Guy who Reincarnated into a Total Fantasy Knockout*. Thanks for coming to my TED talk! Whew! In any event, thanks for reading our mag, and please enjoy the pic from *Life with an Ordinary Guy* (etc., etc.) on this very page!



Life with an Ordinary Guy who Reincarnated into a Total Fantasy Knockout

Hello Otaku USA,
I hope you are doing well and in good health. I currently have 6 issues of your magazine. I've seen on your website that you've done some issues in the past regarding *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. I have to check those ones out because I'm a huge fan of Hirohiko Araki's masterpiece. I've just begun watching the recently released episodes of *Stone Ocean* and I'm super excited to see how it turns out! I'm also a big fan of *Ace Attorney*, which I don't believe you have covered in any of your issues yet. Apollo and Klavier are by far my favorite

characters from this series. Thank you so much for making these magazines and for opening my eyes to a whole bunch of different things I never thought I would be interested in!

-JoJo

Hi JoJo! Thanks for your message. Have you been having any bizarre adventures lately? Well, if you're looking at this issue, we'd love to see the shock and surprise on your face as you behold our big feature on your top show *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean*! We hope you enjoy it a lot! As for *Ace Attorney*... OBJECTION! We have featured several stories on this anime series based on the video game phenomenon before, albeit only on our official website! Get thee to www.otakuusa.com and read away! In the meantime, here's a pic of some of your favorite characters!



Ace Attorney

Hey Otaku USA,
I really enjoyed J.L. Carrozza's review of *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0: Thrice Upon a Time*.

However, it's recently come to my attention that, in true Stanley Kubrick (or George Lucas, for you younger filmgoers) fashion, Hideaki Anno has tweaked all four *Rebuild of Evangelion* entries (now renamed *Evangelion 1.11: You Are (Not) Alone*, *Evangelion 2.22: You Can (Not) Advance*, *Evangelion 3.33: You Can (Not) Redo*, and *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0: Thrice Upon a Time*).

Would any of you be willing to write a deep dive review for an upcoming issue of *Otaku USA* that details all the changes these new versions bring to bear? Thanks!

-Julian



Hi Julian! Thanks for your message! Glad you liked our coverage of *Evangelion 3.0 + 1.0: Thrice Upon a Time* (for my money, the anime movie event of 2022!). While we have covered all of these films individually over the years when they were released, we confess we haven't tried to catalog all the different directorial tweaks and re edits they've gone through. It's an idea for sure, and we never get tired of talking about Eva, so stay glued to these pages. In the meantime, here's a pic from *Rebuild era Evangelion*! Thanks!

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!

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Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

Tokyo Revengers Goods Get Pop Team Epic Twist

One of the best surprises in recent months was the reveal that *Pop Team Epic* is getting a second season. Who could've seen that coming? The only thing more surprising was how quickly we fell in love with *Pop Team Epic* creator Bkub Okawa's take on another hit anime adaptation, *Tokyo Revengers*, which is also gearing up for a continuation of its own.

The collaboration between Okawa and the *Tokyo Revengers* anime arrived in the form of a set of mini acrylic standees featuring characters like Mikey, Takemichi, and more as depicted by everyone's favorite ne'er-do-well mangaka. Naturally, there's nothin' quite like 'em, and they're available to purchase from shops like Animall for ¥4,400 (\$38) a pop.



© Ken Wakui, KODANSHA / TOKYO REVENGERS Anime Production Committee

Celebrate 25 Years of Evangelion with EVA GIRLS Figures

We're a little past the 25th anniversary of Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* anime at this point, but the party continues in stride thanks to a new set of 1/7 scale figures from Kaiyodo. The EVA GIRLS set does exactly what it promises, offering up detailed renditions of Rei Ayanami, Asuka Shikinami Langley, and Mari Makinami Illustrious for fans to proudly display on their shelves.

Standing at roughly 21cm and sculpted by Hayashi Hiroki, the figures don't come cheap. Each one will cost you ¥13,970 (about US\$120), so you'll want to set aside a decent chunk of change if you're aiming for all three. Last year was essentially the Year of EVA thanks to the fourth and final *Rebuild* film's resounding success, so we might as well carry the *Evangelion* hangover into this year with a slightly bruised wallet!



Tales of Arise Alphen Figure is Even Impressive as Prototype

If you played and enjoyed *Tales of Arise*, there's a figure on the way you're going to want to keep your eyes on. Kotobukiya shared an early look at a 1/8 scale figure of Alphen, the main protagonist of the latest entry in the RPG series, and he even manages to look really cool in unpainted prototype form.

At the time of this writing, there's still no release date for Alphen, and the action-packed dynamic pose of the figure has us excited to find out when to expect his arrival. Alphen is next in line for the series following the previously showcased Rinwell figure, and there's also a Dohalim figure in development, so stay tuned for more on these!



© Bandai Namco Entertainment



Sword Art Online's Asuna Figure Classes It Up in Crystal Dress

Following the successful release of the *Sword Art Online Progressive: Aria of a Starless Night* anime film—which adapts the spinoff series by original creator Reki Kawahara that retells the Aincrad arc from Asuna's perspective—a gorgeous new figure has touched down. Coming from eStream's Shibuya Scramble Figure brand, the 1/7 scale Asuna Crystal

Dress ver. figure is up for pre-order ahead of a release sometime in 2022.

That gives fans plenty of time to hopefully order and receive the figure before the second part of the feature opens in Japan later this year. As for the price, you'll have to throw down ¥38,500 (about US\$337) to obtain this beautifully crafted formal attire figure.

Believe It!

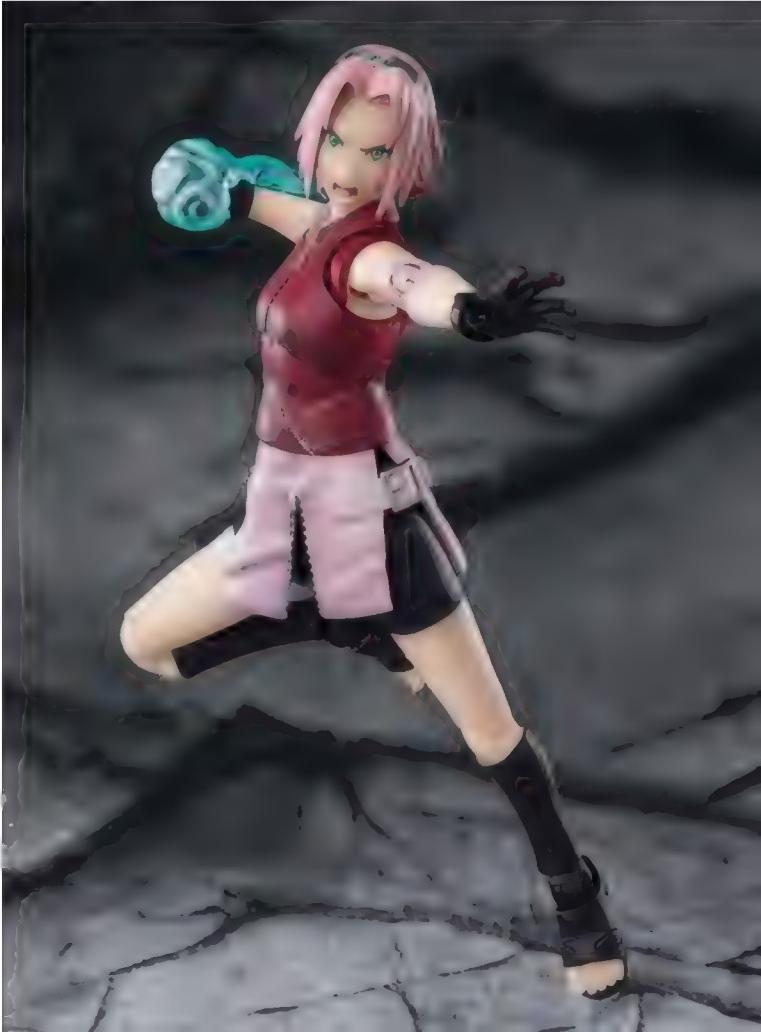
Hark! It's an all-new *NARUTO* series from S.H.Figuarts, channeling decades of know-how into making palm-sized figures with exquisite sculpting, coloring, and high posability that captures their dynamic range as characters!

The first three characters to appear in this new series are three legendary ninja, NARUTO UZUMAKI (The Jinchuuriki entrusted with Hope), SASUKE UCHIHA (He who bears all Hatred), and SAKURA HARUNO (Inheritor of Tsunade's indomitable will)!

The heads feature new sculpting, for beautiful profiles! Realistically sculpted hair and chin-lines add a sense of natural realism! Ninja effects such as Rasengan and Chidori are included, letting you re-create dynamic action scenes!

The new S.H.Figuarts *NARUTO* series is sure to win over the hearts of *NARUTO* fans all over the globe.

Pre-orders began last January, with the figures going on sale starting in June 2022!



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NARUTO

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TSUKIPRO the Animation

Behind the music



STUDIO/COMPANY

RATING

Tsukino Talent Production was founded in the year 2000 and represents idol singers and groups in a wide variety of genres. Based in Tokyo and overseen by company president Mikoto Tsukino, it's taken bands like SolidS, QUELL, SOARA, and Growth from talented hopefuls to Budokan arena headliners. It's also completely fictional.

That's not to say it simply doesn't exist. You can absolutely listen to songs by their idols, follow their YouTube channel, and celebrate their stars' birthdays. But each talent repped by the company is a fictional character voiced by a professional voice actor. It's part of a massive media mix project that includes CDs, manga, films, stage

shows, and now two separate anime series: *Tsukiuta*, and *TsukiPro: The Animation*.

While the two series take place in the same universe and occasionally have some overlap, *TsukiPro* focuses on the four aforementioned fictional bands. The teams of male idols have a big task ahead of them: prepare for a Budokan concert, and all that entails. That means not only writing and rehearsing new numbers, but also taking part in idol activities and making sure their heads are on straight for the big day.

The stories we follow are nothing weird or supernatural (not in the first season, at least). It's just days in the lives of idols. But, as with



anyone, what looks like a standard "idol activity" to anyone else could be difficult or stressful. QUELL's Kuga twins, for example, are asked to perform in a play whose themes hit uncomfortably (and indelicately) close to their upbringing in an orphanage. Dai and Rikka of SolidS are cast as a knight and a princess in a makeup commercial, but Dai is uncomfortable with modeling. Ryota of Growth has a harsh rivalry with

an idol from a different agency. All those moments, as in real life, contribute to their careers and the music they make.

The second season of the anime does go slightly off the realism rails, if only for a bit. In 2017, the franchise's limited-time shop introduced the *yokai*-themed *AU Tsukino Hyakkiyakou*, depicting its stars as various legendary monsters. It was popular enough to return in 2021, get a stage adaptation, and eventually inspire three episodes of the anime. It's a fun change of pace and made for some lovely art in the midst of what's generally a fairly standard-looking series.

What makes *TsukiPro* work, funny enough,



is wish fulfillment. In a world of entertainment growing ever more parasocial, fans can feel entitled to a portion of their favorite performers' privacy—which, of course, they're not. Meanwhile, these fictional idols are designed to have their private lives seen, discussed, and theorized about. It's nobody's business why a real-world singer suddenly left the stage during a performance; but we're cut in on those moments with these idols, and nobody's privacy is compromised.

Each season ends with its big payoff: the concert the idols have been aiming for. While it's the same 22-ish minutes as every other episode, it's packed with songs, choreography, and cool stage costumes. Frankly, it is the best part of each season, in large part because watching the performances after knowing what each character went through is pretty gratifying.

Visually, *TsukiPro* is exactly what you'd expect of a show of its kind. It's all right, and it gets the point across. Like just about all idol-centric anime, it cuts away to CG when it's time to dance—which means every opening and the entirety of the concert episodes. It's at its best



in the second season, especially with slower choreography.

TsukiPro the Animation is, unsurprisingly, made pretty much exclusively for existing fans of the media mix project. The show is

simply another way to get to know the characters. Consider it a long *Behind the Music*: if the personalities interest you, then the show will interest you.

-Kara Dennison

Future Boy Conan

Hayao Miyazaki's landmark classic finally comes to the US



STUDIO/COMPANY
GKIDS
RATING
10+

I just love how frequently I've been getting to say "one of the anime we never thought would officially see the light of day in the USA is finally here" lately, and now here we are again. For decades I had been told that 1978's *Future Boy Conan* was quite possibly the single greatest anime television series of all time,

but acquiring even okay quality copies in English was not exactly easy. A legal release seemed impossible; not only was *Conan* explicitly inspired by the 1970 novel *The Incredible Tide* by the late Alexander Key—who, as the story goes, hated the substantial changes and forbade an English language release—it was and remains to this day the only television series to be directed entirely by Hayao Miyazaki, who would go on to become co-founder of Studio Ghibli and the single most renowned, recognizable anime filmmaker in the world. Fortunately for us, after a decade of

stellar work distributing the Studio Ghibli library in North America, distributor GKIDS had the clout to make it happen. We now have a 4K digital restoration of *Future Boy Conan* available on Blu-Ray, and as of this writing it's readily available at every Wal-Mart, Target, and Best Buy in the nation not only in its original Japanese with English subtitles but with a brand-new English dub. We've never had it so good.

Thirty years from the date of its original broadcast, in the near future year of 2008, the Great Disaster happens. Earth is devastated by weapons so powerful the planet's rotational axis shifts, tearing about the continents and fully submerging major cities. Years later (possibly 2021, so maybe that's the REAL reason we had to wait!), *Conan* is a cheerful young boy on a remote island who is far stronger, faster, more resilient, and can hold his



Future Boy Conan © NIPPON ANIMATION CO., LTD.

Project A-Ko: Perfect Edition

Follow your dream

Few titles embody all that the phrase "1980s anime" conjures better than 1986's *Project A-Ko*: a lavishly hand-animated feature film with an unforgettable soundtrack whose plot, characters, and action sequences were so magnificently outrageous that a generation of American audiences first exposed to it during Sci-Fi Channel's 1994 Animation Marathon (hosted by Ralph Bakshi!) didn't fully realize it was a spoof parody of other then-popular anime. The likes of this shall never be made again.

Fiery redhead supergirl A-ko (literally "Girl A") is a new transfer student at Graviton High School along with her best friend from childhood, the gratingly over-the-top annoying crybaby C-ko (whose cooking skills are atrocious despite the presentation). They immediately catch the attention of their classmate B-ko: a rich sophisticated genius who's (inexplicably) head over heels for C-ko and wishes to get A-ko out of the way.

To this end, B-ko picks a series of progressively outlandish proxy fights with A-ko in which we learn two things: one, that B-ko can quickly construct massive giant robots for her underling classmates to use against A-ko; two, that A-ko has literally superhuman speed, power, and toughness. Eventually B-ko has no choice but to fight A-ko one-on-one, and that's



STUDIO/COMPANY
Discotek Media
RATING
13+



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breathe much longer than an average kid; the first thing we see him do is kill a great white shark underwater which he then effortless carries back on land. That's when Conan discovers a mysterious young girl, Lana—the first girl he's ever seen, in fact—washed up ashore. Lana appears to exhibit some degree of telepathy with birds and speaks of the land of High Harbor where she seeks a Dr. Briac Lao, but she is kidnapped by pursuing soldiers. This sets Conan off on his journey where he makes new friends, visits exotic places, topples a dictatorship, smokes possibly not tobacco cigarettes with other young children, battles feral hogs (also not so feral hogs), and takes a far greater amount of physical punishment than

your typical anime protagonist. The background reminders of the civilization that was—rusted cars and ships overgrown with vegetation; skyscrapers now fully submerged—play to our modern imminent climate change ecological disaster anxieties.

Over the course of its 26 episodes, you will absolutely see elements in *Future Boy Conan* that were later refined or revisited to result in similar scenes or characters as seen in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *Castle in the Sky*, *Princess Mononoke* and maybe even *The Castle of Cagliostro*. Hayao Miyazaki was not only the overall series director; he was also character designer and mechanical designer (the Blu-Ray set includes a booklet with some

select model sheets), and chief storyboarder. Joining him for the ride are the other future cornerstones of Studio Ghibli, Isao Takahata and mentor Yasuo Otsuka, with some contributions by future *Mobile Suit Gundam* creator Yoshiyuki Tomino as well as Noboru Ishiguro (original *Macross*, *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*). If you like those works or recognize those names, then you'll want this one in your collection. I don't know if I would go so far as to declare *Future Boy Conan* "the greatest anime television series of all time," but considering how remarkably well it holds up despite being from close to half a century ago, it certainly ranks among them.

-Daryl Surat

about the time when the alien invasion commences. (In case you're wondering: yes, this WAS an inspiration for *Kill la Kill!*)

For decades, we were told time and again that the original film masters to *Project A-Ko* were lost forever, which is why all prior releases (even Discotek's DVD) had to be sourced from ever-deteriorating laserdiscs, often from fan collections. Turns out the masters for *A-Ko* were mis-filed all this time along with several other anime classics, and their rediscovery has allowed Discotek Media to restore the movie frame-by-frame and release this definitive Perfect Edition. Now, for the first time, you can see *Project A-Ko* how it deserves to be seen: with pristine color and picture quality, proper aspect ratios (the film was storyboarded to be shown in widescreen but animated open-matte, so both versions are included), redone subtitles that include various back-

ground signs that were never before translated, and fully restored audio for both the original Japanese and the fantastic English dub (which no longer sounds as muffled as previous releases). I'm certain a 4K UHD

Moriyama. But there is also a commentary track by the lead Japanese voice actors as well as featurettes regarding the restoration, a documentary on the music, vintage promotional materials, production

On top of all that, there are tons of liner notes, assorted trivia, and a 40+ slide gallery of the various background gags. This "Perfect Edition" isn't just the movie, but an archive of essentially its entire history.

Project A-Ko is special: a landmark example of "1980s otaku anime aesthetic" never fully replicated since, not even by its sequels. If you're an old-schooler who doesn't need some magazine to explain to you that their teacher is literally magical girl Creamy Mami, then you'll be blown away by how spectacular this edition looks.

If you've never seen this before, know that one or two jokes may not land quite so well in 2022—par for the course with 1980s comedy, let alone one originally pitched as hentai—but the action, animation, and explosions more than hold up throughout.

Recommended

-Daryl Surat



release is forthcoming, but if *Robot Carnival* on UHD is anything to go by, that UHD will be just for the movie, so you'll still want this Blu-Ray for all the extras ... and I do mean ALL the extras.

All original extras from previous releases are retained, most notably the Japanese commentary track from animation director Yuji

materials, model sheets for like EVERYTHING, art galleries, the original theatrical program book, and plenty of other materials thanks to the generosity of superfans dedicated to collecting all things *Project A-Ko* over the decades. There's even a full animatic of the film's entire storyboard synced side by side with the movie.

The Heike Story

Challenging, but worth it



STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
TV-14

Of all the historical tales found in Japan, perhaps the most classic is *The Tale of the Heike*, or simply *Heike Monogatari*, which recounts the rise of a once-powerful Taira clan known as the Heike, their struggle against the Minamoto clan during the Genpei War for control of Japan, the internal factions within the clan, and their ultimate karmic downfall. It's been translated to English multiple times, one version of which managed to rack up about 800 pages in length! But the version we're looking at is the most recent anime adaptation (which, this point forward, will just be called *The Heike Story*), which actually adapts Hideo Furukawa's 2016 translation of the story.

For starters, it's ... a lot. Not to say that's a bad thing, but approaching this show is very much like approaching a period drama without knowing what country it's taking place in. Its historical background alone is rather daunting a thing to



©The Heike Story Project



Pokémon Journeys: The Series

To train them is my cause



STUDIO/COMPANY

RATING

As long as PokéMon fans can remember, the legendary Ash Ketchum has been the star of the show. Occasionally the spotlight has shifted to other characters in the PokéMon universe, but mostly, we're usually along for the ride with Ash and whatever mission he's decided to embark on at the time. *PokéMon Journeys* takes a different approach to

the typical setup, with Ash taking a step back to introduce protagonist Goh and his Scorbunny for a scrappy new adventure. As a result, it's a new slice of *PokéMon* magic that will no doubt please fans hungry for more.

Of course, the story can't get underway without making sure to introduce Ash. After establishing his history throughout the *PokéMon* series, we eventually meet Goh, a young trainer who's looking for the legendary PokéMon Lugia. From the first moment Ash and Goh meet, we learn Goh is extremely knowledgeable about PokéMon. From his "prediction" that Lugia will appear in a certain area to his very

quick friendship with Ash, Goh is an intriguing character, but the famous PokéMon trainer's polar opposite.

As such, most of the establishing episodes are spent showing Ash and Goh as they work together and grow even stronger, complementing each other nicely over as the series pro-



examine. Much like how an indie flick challenges your preconceptions of modern cinema, so does this show come up from behind and smack you in the face with regard to your knowledge of history, but not like in a *Here's what really happened!* kind of way—more of a *Here's a story you may have never seen before* kind of way.

The audience gets a close-up look at each of the members of the Heike clan, and we get drawn into their family politics until we can no longer call ourselves an audience, but rather members of the Heike. But by all means and purposes, *The Heike Story* is very much a political drama. The only thing in this show that can be called supernatural is Biwa's ability to see into the future, but that never really plays a factor in the lives of the clan members. In fact, Biwa—who, by the way—is an anime-original character—feels very much like an observer in her own home, but that doesn't necessarily make her distant. It's through her eyes that we see everything play out: every success, death, battle, and fight over succession. She is, by all accounts, the eyes and the ears of the story, and once she can see no more, she lives in the past and recounts the story so the events she saw are never forgotten, thus humanizing a piece that could easily be lost



to the sands of time.

Of course, if there's anything that doesn't need historical context, it's the show's art and music. Simply put, it's just plain gorgeous. Thanks to

the minds of Science SARU (they previously did this small show called *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!*; maybe you've heard of it?), we're treated to colorful abodes, carefully crafted moments of quiet, and scenes not too far off from traditional Japanese paintings. It even manages to make a bloodies battlefield look stunning (I mean, there is a war going on and all). Even the way flowers fall to symbolize the various deaths in the tale is rather pleasing to the eye. And Biwa singing the stories she witnessed in her past make up some of the more striking shots in the series. The music, meanwhile, isn't just based on the time period it's focusing on; it also uses more anachronistic sounds, most of which work shockingly well (since Biwa can see into the future, it's not that much of a stretch).

The Heike Story is not going to be for everyone. While it's difficult for me to say just how much its historical context acts as much of a barrier in the first place, its messages of family, life and death, and the unstoppable passage of time make up most of the show's more engrossing moments. It's challenging, but worth it.

-Michael Goldstein

gresses. Ash has an abundance of experience as a Pokémon trainer, where Goh is still quite green. He's nowhere near as friendly or as flexible as Ash, and as such he does run into his own problems along the way on his path to greatness. There are still a myriad of lessons he needs to learn before he can truly say he's on Ash's level. Because as much as you may love Pokémon, genuine joy and excitement about becoming a trainer isn't going to help you on your path to catching them all—you need to be disciplined and understanding as well.

When Goh and Ash happen upon a wild Scorbunny who's being hassled by an old man, Goh proves that he's capable of this kind of growth, by inspiring the Scorbunny and even prompting it to want to join him on his Pokémon journey. Goh's reply isn't exactly encouraging at first, but he eventually becomes less prickly as the tale unfolds. Luckily, Ash and Pikachu are still the stalwart partners you expect them to be.

Where Goh fails with his shortcomings, the popular Pokémon pair make up for it. Otherwise, Goh would have trouble carrying the series on his own. He isn't particularly likeable when adventuring



solo, and while he has potential to be the same kind of relatable hero that Ash is, he isn't like that at all for these first few stories. There's an accessible character arc here that you'll love to see unfold, and one that you'll appreciate by the time both parts have elapsed.

Much of the series feels familiar in that way, in fact – except for some key areas. The animation, while colorful, is much lower quality (and less detailed) than the classic '90s *Pokémon* series and is more in line with the more recent installments in the *Pokémon* continuity. While the creatures themselves look good enough, both Ash and Goh look considerably "kiddified."

Pokémon series have looked much better in the past, especially Ash. The switch to this odd, blobby style is a bit jarring, but it can be overlooked. The loss of classic voice actors, however, is a bit harder to get over, even though it's been some time since their recasting.

All that aside, *Pokémon Journeys* is a fun way to get back into the *Pokémon* franchise if you've been checking out other things for a while, or if you've been jonesing for a new story with familiar faces. It's very much one of those series that will be a slow burn, with an abundance of character development to look forward to as it stretches on. It may have a slow and familiar start for many, but it ends up being a winning combination of family-friendly fun and action for young viewers and *Pokémon* veterans.

-Brittany Vincent



Blade Runner: Black Lotus

You're talking about memories



STUDIO/COMPANY
Crunchyroll

RATING
Not Rated

Ghost in the Shell, *Cowboy Bebop*, or one of the best character designs of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

It was only right that *Bebop* creator Shinichiro Watanabe was invited to write and direct a short film—*Black Out 2022*—to accompany *Blade Runner 2049*. *Blade Runner* and anime had officially collided for the first time; but, as of last year, not the last.

Blade Runner: Black Lotus returns to the time between the two feature films: a time of global collapse brought on by the blackout of Watanabe's short film. Specifically, it takes place ten years later, in a time when Tyrell's "more human than human" androids known as Replicants are no

longer being produced (allegedly). Our heroine, Elle, knows nothing about any of this. She's an amnesiac with a locked data device, and she only knows two things: where she lives, and that the man she loves gave her the black lotus tattoo on her shoulder. She can also bust out some sick combat moves when pushed.

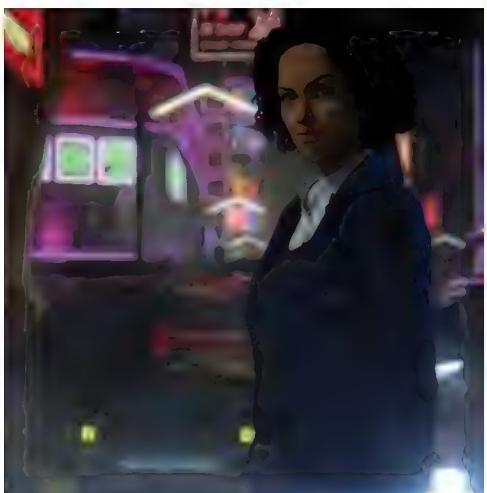
Between the promotional materials and how early in the series the revelation happens, it's hardly a spoiler to say that Elle is our latest Replicant protagonist. But that doesn't snap the lid shut on any mystery or anticipation; if any-

thing, every answer begs more questions. As Elle builds and subsequently works down her hit list, eliminating everyone involved with her brief but horrific past, we see a little more of

this period of *Blade Runner* history open up. We meet Marlowe, a new and terrifyingly single-minded Blade Runner. We discover a suspicious cadre of high-ranking people with unpleasant hobbies. And, pretty much from the word go, we're shown just how closely *Black Lotus* is intended to tie in to *2049*.

Black Lotus is headed up by Kenji Kamiyama and Shinji Aramaki, both of whom have impressive CVs of their own, but who lately have collaborated on Netflix's new takes on *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ultraman*. However you feel about the animation in those will likely carry over to *Black Lotus*—which, while benefiting from an over-





all darker color palette and decent motion capture, does still maintain that near-plasticine look when human(oid) characters come into play. It could be, and has been, argued that this is a bonus: that the artificial vibe of the characters further drives home the blurred lines between human and Replicant.

It does, however, feel a little disappointing that after decades of influence and tribute and even hiring Syd Mead to design a weird Gundam that one time, anime's first full-length crack at *Blade Runner* just slightly whiffs the visual vibe. It's not *not* there. It's so close. And once in a while there's a scene where you really fully feel it. But it always feels like it doesn't hit quite the way it

could. The soundtrack, courtesy of *Blade Runner 2049* composers Gerald Trottman and Michael Hodges, does a lot of heavy lifting in terms of setting the mood. That helps bring things around more than one might initially think.

From a story standpoint, it's nothing mind-blowing—though a story doesn't have to be mind-blowing to be enjoyable. It's a story in the *Blade Runner* universe, one that slots tidily in without too much fuss, even when there are surprises and uncertainties at play. It's fun, and there's action, and we find out a little more about how the world shifted the way it did between films.

On that note, in a lot of ways this is Niander

Wallace Jr.'s origin story. He appears throughout the series, looking a lot less Jared Leto-esque in his early days. His fingerprints are all over Elle's journey—quite literally, in some cases. And while he sticks largely to the background, it's fairly obviously from the word go that the story of Elle is the story of Wallace. Whether she likes it or not.

It's best to come into *Blade Runner: Black Lotus* with middling expectations. Look forward to some fun action and lore drops, and some light-touch philosophy that plays nicely with the franchise's overarching themes. You'll have a good time, if nothing else.

-Kara Dennison

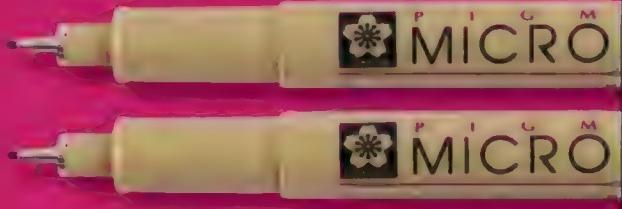


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MANGA REVIEWS

The Mangaphile

New Manga Reviews

Happy Kanako's Killer Life

Tired of your job? So was Kanako Nishino. She quit her office job in advertising to search for greener pastures, and she found them ... sort of. Her boss may be scary, but she's good at her new job and she feels fulfilled after completing every assignment. There's just one thing: it's a very different industry than she previously worked in.

Being a professional assassin is a departure from advertising, but Kanako is a quick study, and she's settling into her new role just fine.

That's the joke at the crux of *Happy Kanako's Killer Life*. This collection of four-panel gag comics soon settles into a hilarious routine, setting Kanako up with her new position and getting her to her first kill within the first couple of pages. She doesn't need much training, just encouragement from her new boss. Her reward? A party with plenty of beer and snacks.

At first Kanako is reticent. How can she just start killing people she doesn't know? But those worries quickly melt away. Watching Kanako become okay with more and more egregious acts in the new position she's taken up is ludicrous. It seems outrageous a young office worker could be not only capable of murder, but good at it, but it works, and works well.

Even though the strip's a one-trick pony with a single endlessly repeating gag, it's a fun read; there's no lore to keep up on, no complex character development, and just enough quirkiness to Kanako's personality to make her entertaining to follow through every exchange with her rough-and-tumble boss. There's a running joke that she loves to make animal puns, each one cuter than the last—you "otter" believe it! The translation wedges in some truly inventive wordplay that may make readers with a low pun tolerance wince, but they work with Kanako's silly personality, and it's fun to catch them throughout the volume.

Happy Kanako's Killer Life isn't going to win any awards for nuanced storytelling or careful worldbuilding. But it's short, sweet, and definitely worth more than a few chuckles. If you don't want



PUBLISHER

Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART

Toshiya Wakabayashi

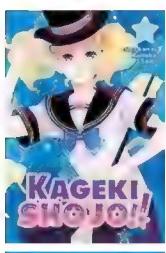
RATING

Teen



Happy Kanako's Killer Life © Toshiya Wakabayashi 2019

anything too complicated and thrive on outlandish setups, this strip seems likely to get even funnier as it goes on, as long as it keeps building on its goofy premise. [Brittany Vincent]



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Kumiko Saiki

RATING
Teen [13+]

since the 1910s. Who wouldn't want a backstage glimpse of this remarkable institution, laded with all the sparkling shojo-manga trimmings?

Kageki Shojo!! follows freshmen in the Kouka School's 100th class, particularly two promising actresses, Sarasa and Ai. Sarasa is tall (at least by Japanese standards; her 5'8" height has people gasping, "She's **huge!** A giant!") and relentlessly peppy, with literal stars in her eyes. Her ultimate dream is to play Lady Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles*, a popular production in the real Takarazuka theater. Meanwhile, the quiet and wary Ai, who belonged to an idol group before enrolling in the school, watches cynically from the wings. Sarasa seems naturally suited to male roles, Ai to female, but they have a long way to go before they're ready for the stage.

Though there's no shortage of drama (Sarasa has a secret boyfriend training in a kabuki troupe!), *Kageki Shojo!!* focuses on the characters' day-to-day struggles as they train for show business. Kumiko Saiki draws not just the young performers, but all the backstage business of a theater company: costuming, set design, construction, playwriting. A large chunk of Volume 1 is spent on one class assignment—performing a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*—and Saiki fills this subplot with character moments and nuts-and-bolts theatrical details that make the reader feel the girls' passion for their craft. "We might be students now, but we are destined to be professionals!" a student declares. "You'd better drill that into your skull, okay?!"

Kageki Shojo!! loves classic shojo manga almost as much as it loves musical theater. In many ways, it's a throwback to older shojo titles that were light on romance but heavy on friendship, adventure, and dreams of succeeding in a glamorous career. Sarasa looks like the heroine of *Candy Candy*, shares a name with the heroine of *Basara*, and drops references to *The Rose of Versailles* and *Glass Mask*. The rail-thin, funny-faced characters have a faintly '90s *Sailor Moon* look. Emotional collage pages, sprinkled with

Heaven's Door © Keiichi Koike 2016



clouds and stars, express the thrill of the stage.

Seven Seas previously published the shorter manga *Kageki Shojo!! The Curtain Rises*, possibly to gauge reader interest before committing to the full series. Whether or not you caught *The Curtain Rises*, *Kageki Shojo!!* is a show not to be missed.

Recommended. [Shaenon K. Garrity]



PUBLISHER
Last Gasp

STORY AND ART
Keiichi Koike

RATING
Mature

from Last Gasp in an elegantly produced oversize edition, is the perfect one-volume introduction to Koike.

The stories in *Heaven's Door* take place in meticulously drawn settings that may or may not be real, inhabited by characters whose perception of reality is not to be trusted. In "3000 Leagues in Search of Mother," two children wander a dream-like VR landscape littered with pop-culture detritus, menaced by tsunamis and mushroom clouds.

"Lazarus Franco's 4 A.M." follows the title character through a haze of drugs as he wanders 1980s Manhattan in search of the purveyors of a mysterious hallucinogen called "deathweed." In "Looper," a slow-moving child follows his pet turtle into a warped experience of time, while the protagonist of "Airway" ricochets between levels of reality during a near-death experience. The collection also includes trippy four-panel strips and experimental short pieces, including silent left-to-right comics.

Koike's naturalistic, hyper-detailed art is strongly reminiscent of *Akira* creator Katsuhiro Otomo, and like Otomo he uses science fiction to explore esoteric ideas like altered consciousness, human evolution, and the nature of reality. The realism of his art makes the psychedelic elements seem hauntingly plausible: landscapes shift, bodies twist and unravel, gods materialize on city streets, and guests at a fancy dinner party feast on raw brain. If you're a fan of old-school underground comics, if you're jonesing for the kind of sci-fi psychological trip you get from *Akira* or the anime of Satoshi Kon, or if you just love diving into great-looking manga art, you owe it to yourself to look through *Heaven's Door*.

Recommended. [Shaenon K. Garrity]

Came the Mirror and Other Tales

Every new collection of short stories from Rumiko Takahashi's "Rumic World" is cause for celebration. *Came the Mirror* is a mixed bag, but it



I Am a Cat Barista ©2020 Hiro Maijima

lives. Heeding Master's sympathetic guidance pushes them forward in their personal and professional lives.

The stories are as sweet as Master's special caffè mocha, and beautiful art complements the cozy stories. Maijima is skilled at character designs, especially Master Hachi himself, and the customers who arrive at the café are as unique as their problems. Clean inks and lively facial expressions give each panel energy and verve.

While the majority of the manga is set in Hachimare, the backgrounds are detailed enough to give a sense of place and the story never feels constrained. Readers get glimpses into the everyday lives of the hapless humans in need of the café. The plot travels to offices, schools, bars and classrooms, all rendered in the same polished art as the rest of the book. In a bonus chapter, readers are even treated to a side story set in another cat café run by a cat, an abandoned housecat who now runs a cat café specializing in fostering and adopting Tokyo strays. While warmth and kindness may be in short supply in the real world, it's available in abundance at the Café Hachimare.

Recommended. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Yuuki Doumoto
RATING
13+

good D&D players know, holy power does extra

damage to the undead, Shibuki must find a way to break the curse. What's more, the existence of the curse means the Demon King is still alive. And so Shibuki, Surfinia, and the witch Lyco set out to kill the Demon King again.

Necromance mixes awkward romance, a sexy succubus, and magical hijinks into a playful look at post-quest problems. While the world is yet another generic Europa Land, the art is cute and the characters have a nice RPG look to them. The costumes are simple and not too gratuitous, at least not until Vanilla the succubus makes her appearance wearing barely-there panties and pasties. Doumoto has a light touch with the inks and a good eye for sparkly screen-tones which give certain panels a pitch-perfect shojo feel. There's plenty of humor and heart in this campaign, as well as some solid character development.

Despite their generic designs, the heroes in the party have a remarkable amount of personality. It's a little disturbing that the 17-year-old Shibuki is trying to return to life so he can marry the 15-year-old Surfinia, but at least in his undead state his attempts to get physical with her are always hilariously thwarted. For the most part, this is a funny, solidly enjoyable book. (Che Gilson)

CREEPY CAT

Flora mysteriously inherits a gothic mansion and, when she moves in, finds out she's not alone. The manor is inhabited by a creepy white cat with red eyes. As Flora accepts her new lot in life, she grows equally wigged-out by and attached to Creepy Cat.

Told primarily in one-page gag strips, this book doesn't have much of an overarching narrative. Instead, *Creepy Cat* is a series of amusing vignettes, some stretching over multiple pages. Cat owners will recognize many of Creepy Cat's behaviors, like busting through the window at the sound of a can opener and gifting cockroaches to his owner. But his magical abilities, which include multiplying, clinging to ceilings, and stretching into a massive cat-snake, earn Creepy his moniker.

Not only is the book



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART

Cotton Valent

RATING

10+

funny, but it boasts great full-color art in an angular style reminiscent of Tim Burton films. The color scheme is primarily purple, black, and white, but Valent balances dark tones with pops of warm color and enough contrast to make each panel stand out. The characters are adorable and expressive; Flora is a particularly winning design who will worm her way into the most jaded goth heart. There are a few supporting characters, such as Oscar the policeman, who has a crush on Flora. Of course, the shape-changing Creepy Cat is the real star, and he strikes the perfect balance between nightmarish and cute. Who wouldn't want a squishy, cuddly, possibly multi-dimensional Creepy Cat of their very own? Though perhaps all cats are multi-dimensional floofs.

Aside from a couple of nicely CG-rendered houses, the backgrounds are the least finished





Deadpool: Samurai © 2022 MARVEL published by VIZ Media

element of the art. For the most part, though, the simplicity fits the comic-strip mood and accomplishes what it needs to. The volume ends with a piece by Valent about her journey to publication which is worth reading, especially for aspiring creators who have faced career setbacks. *Creepy Cat* is the perfect book for anyone who loves horror-tinged comedy and, of course, cats.

Recommended. (Che Gilson)

Deadpool: Samurai

The world's most popular Marvel comic in 2021—as in, actual comic that people read—had nothing

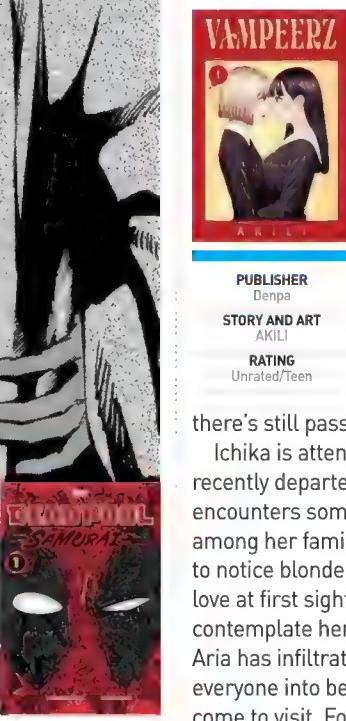
to do with direct market crossover “events” spanning multiple titles. It was *Deadpool: Samurai*, by author San-shirou Kasama and artist Hikaru Uesugi. This two-volume “super collaboration” between Marvel Comics and Shueisha was read by over one million Shonen Jump+ users digitally, and it deserves the attention.

The story almost doesn’t

matter. Deadpool, the Merc with a Mouth, heads to Japan to establish a superhuman Samurai (not Syber) Squad with two young ladies: Sakura Spider (“they went for the lowest-hanging fruit and whipped up an original Spider-Man”) and Kage, an idol singer possessed by a symbiote (“knock-off Venom”). A string of meta-gags pertaining to manga publishing, licensing, character design, other *Jump* and Marvel characters, events of the various MCU movies, and more ensues. One of my favorite jokes is right at the start, where a giant double-page spread of destruction is followed immediately by Deadpool decrying how little time you spent looking at the art considering how many days the assistants had to work on drawing it.

Volume 1 features our “hero” assembling a squad and dealing with low-level goons in the process. The most memorable villain is a crazed otaku idol stalker who doesn’t understand Deadpool’s references to *Dr. Slump*, *Tomorrow’s Joe*, *Devilman*, *Baki*, *Fire Punch*, and *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure* because, as a modern-day otaku, the only stuff he knows about is moe and isekai. If you don’t get the references either, well, look ‘em up! This isn’t Ernest Cline-style hack “geekery”! This is the real deal. The book also features a fair share of Marvel cameos (including Spider-Man!), making it basically everything you’d want “Deadpool in manga form” to be. Why, in the next volume he might even dress up as a samurai!

Recommended. (Daryl Surat)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY
San-shirou Kasama

ART
Hikaru Uesugi

RATING
Teen +

Vampeerz

We’re over a decade past the height of the YA sexy vampire media fad, but the concept of lusty ethereal beings entering the lives of hapless maidens is a story as old as time. So what makes *Vampeerz* different from all the other vampire romances out there? Admittedly, not much on the surface, but this book from Denpa may surprise those who doubt there’s still passion to be found in the genre.

Ichika is attending the memorial service for her recently departed grandmother when she encounters someone who looks out of place among her family members. No one else seems to notice blonde-haired Aria, but for Ichika, it’s love at first sight. Before Ichika even has time to contemplate her attraction to this strange girl, Aria has infiltrated her family and brainwashed everyone into believing she’s a distant relative come to visit. For a short while, Ichika is willing to play along, until Aria sneaks a quick evening snack from Ichika’s neck.

Whether it’s a kiss or a bite, *Vampeerz* indulges in plenty of suggestive physicality between Ichika and Aria from the first couple of chapters. Mangaka Akili is an old hand at more



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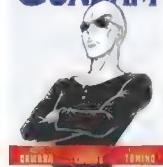
hardcore erotic manga, and that passion bleeds through this much more subtle romance. Aria plays the role of the aloof and whimsical immortal, but its Ichika's responses to Aria and the sudden changes in her world that are most absorbing. It's refreshing to see a protagonist who's in control of her emerging sexuality and has the wherewithal to set some boundaries before things get out of hand. While Aria might be willing to settle for just a dram of blood, Ichika starts pursuing Aria for her own reasons.

Beyond the immediate chemistry between the leads, *Vampeerz* is a fascinating read just to see what a talent for porn can accomplish in a non-explicit manga. The influence of erotic manga creeps into the pacing and panel work, alternating between slow moments and provocative situations with natural grace. The plot itself isn't too exciting, with the majority of the first volume devoted to generating the initial sparks between the heroines. The book can also be pretty funny when it wants to be, with a couple of great bits of physical comedy that caught me off guard.

It's too early to call, but *Vampeerz* seems likely to grow into a worthy addition to the publisher's eclectic catalogue of winners. While a vampire

romance isn't as original a concept as a reader might expect from Denpa, the skilled, offbeat execution holds a lot of promise. With most of the formalities out of the way between Ichika and Aria, the next volume should prove to be a spicier affair. **Recommended.** (David Estrella)

GUNDAM



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
Hideki Okawa

RATING
14+

The Men Who Created Gundam

It took over a decade, but leave it to Denpa to officially release a gem I was certain Sunrise Animation would never allow America to have: a gag manga about how the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* television series and movie trilogy were created. Originally titled *Gundam Genesis* (a.k.a. *Gundam Sousei*) but presumably renamed *The Men Who Created Gundam* so as not to confuse readers who might mistake it for an in-universe spinoff a la *Gundam: The Origin*, this mega-fictionalization opens with a whopper of an understatement: "The people and events depicted within are based on reality—

with some embellishments." Such is to be expected from mad genius Hideki Ohwada, who specializes in outrageously meta-comedies such as *The Legend of Koizumi*.

Think of it as *Shirobako* combined with *Sen-goku Basara*. Key *Gundam* staffers are depicted as demigods upon this world (or personifications of the characters they voice), fully aware that they are making a masterwork unlike any the world has ever seen. "Congrats, gentlemen! You're all very lucky. After all, you were there when animation history changed forever," declares the impetuous and uncouth Yoshiyuki Tomino, whose chief running gag is that he, erm, molests his female staff? (For what it's worth, the moe girl production assistant Momoe Kusakari is fictional, added so this tale would have at least one woman/normal person.) This is the sort of manga where Hajime Yatake—Sunrise's collective pen name—is an actual person; where Ichiro Itano stands in the middle of a building being demolished to see how smoke moves.

In addition to including the entire series in one 550-plus-page volume along with the "Tomino Legends" side stories, *The Men Who Made Gundam* includes essays, interviews, and original production material photos to detail what *really* happened during *Gundam*'s production. That opening disclaimer is accurate! **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai

In recent years, the venerable *Dragon Quest* franchise has finally established a foothold in the North American RPG market. For years, perennial rival series *Final Fantasy* was the only game in town, but nowadays RPG fans are spoiled rotten by the number of options they have compared to the days of the Super Nintendo. Now *Dragon Quest: the Adventure of Dai*, one of Japan's best-selling manga titles in the nineties, is finally available in English for the first time.

Young Dai has been raised by monsters on an island far from human civilization and has never known another human. This is a subversion of the usual opening to a *Dragon Quest* game, in which a young man is typically called upon by his king to venture forth into the land and vanquish monsters. True to Akira Toriyama's original designs, the monsters on Dermline Island are super-cute and friendly, with as much personality as creatures based on RPG monsters can have. Dai has big dreams of becoming a vaunted "hero," but his adoptive grandfather, a wizard named Brass, is stubbornly set on making a mage out of the boy, until a group of supposed adventurers set foot on



Pompo: The Cinéphile ©Shogo Sugitani, Production GoodBook 2017

the island with a nefarious plot in mind.

For *Dragon Quest* fans, *The Adventure of Dai* presents an accurate rendition of the original game world mixed with the sensibilities of the later, mid-90s Toriyama. The creative team captures the essence of the beloved series in a way that melds Toriyama's concept art with a player's mental image of what those little sprites on the television might look like in manga form. The first couple of stories are tightly-paced adventures that showcase the possibilities of the setting. In the latter half of the volume, Dai's sudden mid-fight power-ups and magic beams evoke *Dragon Ball Z* more than *Dragon Quest*, but some concessions have to be made to keep the classics relevant. Some of the manga's serious moments may carry less weight to modern readers, such as a certain character death that's set up with every obvious death flag in the book, but keep in mind while you read that these often-parodied tropes were new and surprising once.

Weighing in at over 300 pages with occasional splashes of color, *Dai* offers readers plenty of fast-paced fantasy action. *The Adventure* gets going right away and there are lots of references for the hardcore fans to pick out from page to page. Fans of *Dragon Quest* won't need convincing to check out this book, but newcomers can rest assured that *Dai* is a standalone story that doesn't require a thorough background in a series that's been going strong for over 30 years. [David Estrella]

Pompo: The Cinéphile

For someone who specializes in B-grade movies, young film producer Joelle Davidovich Pomponette, or just "Pompo," seems to have a knack for turning any project into cinema gold, no matter how absurd it may be. One day, her assistant Gene, who seems to be constantly sweating buckets, spots a new script and is moved by its exquisite tale. Pompo gives Gene his first directing gig, shooting the script he just read. As it

turns out, this isn't just any screenplay: it was written by Pompo herself! Meanwhile, Natalie, an ordinary girl with dreams of being an actress, gets discovered by Pompo.

First thing to get out of the way: don't go into this manga expecting to learn about the intricacies of filmmaking in the way that, say, *Shirobako* shares inside info about anime production. While Pompo is the granddaughter

of a famous producer, it's clear from the beginning that the manga has no interest in how movies are normally made. It's an idealistic fantasy of indie filmmaking, despite the characters sometimes becoming strained from overwork, sleeping in the office, and taking part-time jobs to make ends meet. *Pompo* is less interested in the real lives of filmmakers than in championing the pure love of movies. It also dabbles a bit in issues like the marketing cycle, the ideal length of a movie, and how film crews might deal with such misfortunes as rain.

What *Pompo* has in spades is endless film references. Many films get namechecked the first volume, including a rundown of each character's three favorite movies. For readers who aren't movie buffs, there's some discussion of each film and its history to explain how it relates to the character's personality and approach to filmmaking.

The bold, charming artwork adds to the sense of positive affirmation of the creative life. When things look this cute, it's easy to focus on your passion and forget the corporate overlords hounding you as you plow through hours of footage. What *Pompo* lacks in drama or accuracy, it makes up for in devotion to the craft of the moving image. The first volume forms a self-contained story arc, leaving readers curious to see where it goes next. [Michael Goldstein]

Cat Massage Therapy

For anyone who's ever lost track of the time while petting a cat, *Cat Massage Therapy* will elicit plenty of understanding nods. Non-cat-lovers may feel some apprehension toward the idea of a strange talking animal working the kinks out of their back, so the question is: are you in good paws?

The premise of *Cat Massage* might seem flimsy, but bear with me: in an unnamed city in Japan, there is a unique massage parlor entirely run by cats. The protagonist of the manga, an everyday salaryman who has been wrung dry by his job, staggers into



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Haru Hisakawa

RATING
Teen (13+)

the parlor one evening and is convinced by the manager (a cat, of course) to receive a massage. He emerges refreshed and finds himself coming back for repeat visits. Considering that the manager only charges a few nibbles of premium cat treats, it's solid deal.

Cat Massage Therapy is constructed from the dreams and delusions of cat owners who are comforted by soft purrs on their lap or a kneading massage on a sore arm. Originally a short webcomic on Pixiv, *Cat Massage* grew into its own manga series after receiving a very positive response online. The final print version is a full-color book with clean, simple art that allows the stars of the show, the cats, to be displayed in all kinds of angles and positions to emphasize their cuddliness. Stylistically, the cats are drawn with bean-like proportions and eyes like shiny marbles that seem likely to peer into your soul if beheld for too long. The manager and the three kittens who assist him aren't given names as of Volume 1, which feels like a missed opportunity to invent more distinctive personalities for each cat. Aside from the gruff and burly substitute manager that shows up at the end of the volume, the cats are hard to distinguish beyond fur color.

Instead of letting readers get to know the cats better, *Cat Massage Therapy* becomes something of a light office comedy. The salaryman invites the cats to his office, a dreary place where everyone is being ground down by an overbearing boss. The cats do their cute thing to alleviate the tension in

the office, but the manga starts to become less about the cats and more about a few generic human characters you might find in any corporate setting. The polite workplace humor doesn't do much to pad out a book that's already lightweight, and it neglects the element everyone is reading for: cats, cats, cats!

If you're a dog person, *Cat Massage Therapy* might not convince you to switch sides, but it's not really trying to convert anyone. Yes, it's a pile of fluff, but no one is picking up a book called *Cat Massage Therapy* in search of a complex narrative filled with intrigue and excitement. Depending on how much you like cats and how much you hate your desk job, your mileage may vary. (David Estrella)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY
Ko Hiratori

ART
J-ta Yamada

RATING
Mature

JK Haru is a Sex Worker in Another World

In isekai manga, it's not unusual to receive superpowers and special abilities when you wake up in another world. Whether you're a "superuser" in a fantasy video game or the "chosen one" in a magical world, chances are you'll arrive at your new home fully kitted out.

In *JK Haru is a Sex Worker in Another World*, someone gets special abilities: teenage

Haru's former classmate Chiba. After the two of them die in a traffic accident, they both wake up in a fantasy world, Chiba with a host of abilities and a new gig as a hunter—and Haru with nothing. The only way for her to survive in this new world? Become a sex worker.

This isn't an entirely new isekai premise: series like *Call Girl in Another World* and *Interspecies Reviewers* feature protagonists cheerfully running down lists of fantasy races to sleep with. Haru, however, doesn't enjoy her new job or truly see herself as a sex worker. It's just what she has to do to survive in the patriarchal society she finds herself in. As a result, we see the more harrowing side of sex work and the unfairness of living in a society that doesn't offer many options for women. While Haru's classmate revels in his "cheat code"-like abilities, Haru continues to sell her body, submitting herself to humiliating client demands.

But even though fate has dealt Haru a cruel hand, she's optimistic about her future. She befriends other women at the brothel where she eats, drinks, and entertains the male patrons before taking them upstairs. She has big ideas, like opening a restaurant where women can go to dine and not feel so alone and awkward. And she learns from the other women. They even engage in a little friendly competition, but never to the point where she becomes resentful or frustrated about her place on the brothel's rankings. Throughout it all, she works hard to carve out a place for herself in her new life.

It's a story that's often difficult to read, especially since Haru isn't exactly pleased with her lot. But it's beautifully illustrated, with some raw, honest scenes that lend an unexpected maturity to the story. The premise could be played for laughs, but instead it examines Haru's situation, her role in a sexist fantasy world, and how she can make the situation her own. In this opening volume, *JK Haru is a Sex Worker in Another World* finds an interesting twist on the standard portal-fantasy setup. (Brittany Vincent)



JK Haru Is a Sex Worker in Another World © Ko Hiratori / J-ta Yamada 2019

Do You Like Big Girls?

When you're short, life can be frustrating in a variety of ways. But if you're a young man named Sota Tachibana, you might soon realize that you can use that trait to your advantage—especially if you're routinely around girls almost twice your height. In the ecchi manga *Do You Like Big Girls?*, Sota realizes his love for Amazonian women, particularly those on his school's varsity volleyball team.

After being roped into managing the volleyball team by his scheming sister Kaoru, Sota finds himself surrounded by "big" girls, both in stature

and in cup size. And they've all got the hots for him, despite his initial protestations. At first Sota only has eyes for Ayano, a girl on the team he's known for years, who happens to be his sister's rival. They soon hook up, but it turns out she's only interested in his body. At first it's soul-crushing, but word about his sexual prowess gets around. And just like that, while Sota manages the team, he also manages to bed most of its members. From there, *Do You Like Big Girls?*



turns into a series of sexual vignettes as Sota becomes intimately familiar with one towering, athletic girl after another.

That's all well and good, but there's no real reason to remain invested in the story, unless you never tire of sex scenes interspersed with jokes about Sota being smaller than the women he's having casual sex with. It's a pretty thin premise, and the tiny subplot of Sota struggling to become an interim volleyball coach doesn't add much. The only thing that puts this above other porn manga is the exceptional artwork.

If you're looking for some well-drawn ecchi content (and you happen to be short like Sota, or enjoy the tall girl/short guy dynamic) you'll find

plenty to enjoy here, but readers looking for anything more should keep moving. There are porn manga with more developed plot lines for those who want them. *Do You Like Big Girls?* is a giant-sized serving of pure fluff. [Brittany Vincent]

Call Girl in Another World

In most isekai series, when you're whisked away to another world, you start over entirely: new profession, new abilities, and maybe even a new identity! *Call Girl in Another World* is unusual in that human sex worker Yuzuki, after being summoned to a fantasy land by a sorcerer, continues to do sex work in her new surroundings. In fact, it's her only hope of returning to Japan, but now she's learning a whole new set of skills that she didn't have to employ back in Ikebukuro.

Yuzuki has a magical grimoire filled with a list of fantasy races she must learn how to pleasure. There's little explanation of how she got to the fantasy world or why she needs to fulfill this specific task to go home, but it makes for fun, light, beautifully drawn smut. Yuzuki isn't being oppressed (and isn't depressed, since she has a goal to work towards) and the manga gets a lot of humor out of the silly premise. Much of the appeal comes from the heroine's outlook. Instead of resenting the task she's been given, she throws herself into the project and even has some fun with it.

Yuzuki is good at her job and knows it, and we see her spend time perfecting her craft, no matter what her clients ask for. In one chapter, for instance, she must magically transform to fit the needs of a client who prefers a fuller figure. She can even order special items via her cell phone (which still works, somehow) and employ them during her sessions. These plot points, like many others, don't make total sense. But they don't have to, because the story is entertaining enough to toss logic out the window. It's more than clear that the plot is an excuse to get Yuzuki into sexy situations

with a variety of fantasy characters, and that's fine; at least, unlike many hentai titles, *Call Girl* masquerades at having a storyline. It's nice to

follow a sex worker character who does her job with professional pride, enjoys herself, and tries to find ways to make all of her clients feel welcome, from giant boars to elves and everything in between.

This lighthearted sex comedy isn't complex or challenging, but it's a sex-positive tale that'll have you flipping through the pages to admire the art and see how many species Yuzuki can mark off her checklist. [Brittany Vincent]

Sadako-san and Sadako-chan

The Ring/Ringu is one of Japan's most popular horror film franchises. A big element of its spine-tingling appeal is its terrifying, cursed young ghost woman, Sadako. Her iconic appearance, with her white dress and long black hair covering her face, is impossible to escape if you have any interest in J-horror, and even if you're more of a

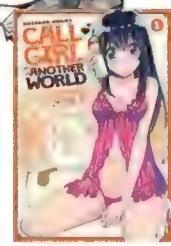
Western horror hound, you've no doubt seen her around. Sadako is many things, but hilarious and adorable usually aren't among them. That's what makes *Sadako-san and Sadako-chan* such a fun read.

This manga gives Sadako a protege of sorts, little Sadako-chan. While trying to curse a girl who's been locked in a closet by her mother, Sadako befriends her instead. The girl, dubbed Sadako-chan, doesn't see the elder Sadako as scary and converses with her like she's any other person. Sadako-san, meanwhile, is at her wit's end. It's getting hard for her to curse people these days. People aren't watching TV or renting movies, so she can't come out of screens and curse them to a terrible death. That's where Sadako-chan comes in. The young girl has a great solution: start making videos together!

Soon, Sadako-san and Sadako-chan are producing YouTube videos as "Double Sadako." Their short, comedic videos attract the attention of another YouTuber, who eventually becomes part of the story as well. Both Sadakos work hard to make content they think will help Sadako-san entice viewers to be cursed, but things seldom work out the way they've planned.

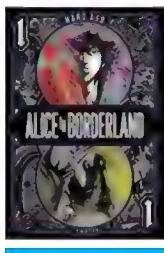
Much of the humor involves Sadako-san's frustrations with the modern world. She doesn't really understand the internet, monetizing videos, or even the newer TVs people have in their homes; she needs a CRT TV to do her job effectively. It's almost like an isekai, with the elder Sadako navigating a strange new world and the younger Sadako working with her to help solve her problems.

The result is a very cute, very funny version of *Ringu*-related lore. Despite yourself, you start to root for the Sadakos to figure out the modern



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Masaヒro Morio
RATING
Mature

world and get some additional curse victims under Sadako-san's belt. It's easy to get into even if you're not familiar with the source material. What would Sadako-san do if she needed help pursuing new victims in the age of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok? Perhaps she really would need the assistance of the younger, tech-savvy generation. Maybe that's the scariest idea of all! (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Haro Aso

RATING
Mature

Alice in Borderland

In most isekai series, the protagonist is transported to a world much more fun and fanciful than the one they came from. Dinosaur people! Cat girls! Delicious food and grand kingdoms! That's not the case in *Alice in Borderland*, where unsuspecting victims are transported to a nightmare realm.

Welcome to the Borderland. Twentysomething

gamer and general layabout Ryohei Arisu finds himself and his friends Chota and Daikichi transported to an alternate Tokyo, a bizarro world full of dangerous, shady characters in which everyone must compete in a series of challenging games—or perish. Each game corresponds to a playing card suit: clubs are all about group work,

Sadako-san and Sadako-chan ©Aya Tsutsumi 2019 ©Koji Suzuki, Noriaki Sugihara 2019 ©2019 "Sadako" Film Partners



diamonds signify logic games, hearts encourage players to work against each other, and spades are physical competitions. These games extend the winners' "visas," which allow them to remain in the Borderland. When the visa expires, so do

they. The characters must juggle figuring out how they got to the Borderland, what it is, and how to escape while completing harrowing challenges and meeting a slew of potential enemies and allies.

Ryokei and his friends end up working alongside Saori, a former office worker who's been trapped in the Borderland for a while and gets them up to speed. Initially tensions mount between them, but once they play their first game the newcomers realize they must work together if they want a chance at survival. From there, the story races along, and it's best not to get too attached to any of the characters.

If you're familiar with "sinister game" stories like *Squid Game*—or the *Alice in Borderland* live-action series on Netflix—you have an idea what to expect. The stakes are high right off the bat; the very first game all but ensures instant death for everyone who chooses the wrong door out of two. To make things more terrifying, it isn't immediately clear why Arisu and his friends are being forced to play.

Alice in Borderland is one of the best manga of recent years involving an alternate universe, a motley cast of characters, and contests to be won. It belongs at the top of your reading list for its storytelling alone, and if you enjoy the Netflix show it's a must-read. Just get ready for some irresistibly brutal gameplay. **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)



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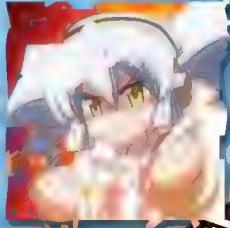




THE BIG

Needless is an adrenaline rush of an anime series that'll bring to mind the best of the shonen genre.

BRAWL!



By
Brittany
Vincent

Earth is in ruins, fifty years after World War III. The once-beautiful city of Tokyo is now a crater, a massive blemish on our blue planet, filled to the brim with contaminated debris. The Black Spot, as it's referred to, is one of many across Japan. With no power, an ominous presence, and slum-like conditions within, the Spots are home to outcasts. Some have found themselves left with strange powers called "fragments" after being exposed to the contaminated area. Their name? "Needless."

Needless is an adrenaline rush of a series that'll bring to mind the best of the shonen genre, while blending bits of intrigue and world-building you'd expect from shows like *Akame ga Kill!* or similar titles of that ilk. Its ultra-stylized

animation and balls-to-the-wall attitude is quite unlike others you've seen before, and if you aren't convinced by its bizarre cast of characters, you'll be on the edge of your seat by the time the out-there plot reaches its climax. And to top it all off? Its satirical nature is close to unmatched. Welcome to the weird and wacky world of *Needless*.

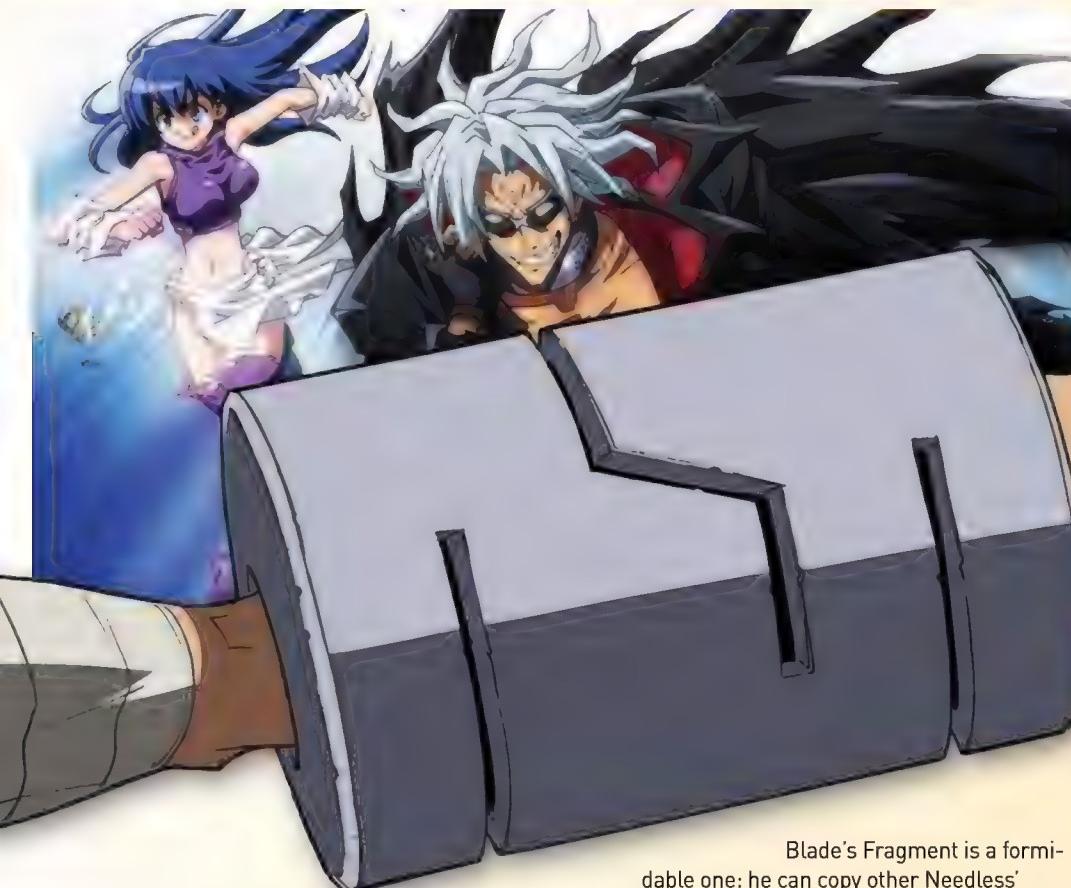
FRAGMENTS OF AN OLD LIFE

Needless centers around those who live in the Black Spot who have gained the Fragments that enable them to use a variety of abilities. Fragments have imbued *Needless* with amazing powers like such as clairvoyance, the ability to hear things from a few feet away or through walls, super speed, and even rainmaking. As





NEEDLESS' ULTRA-STYLIZED ANIMATION AND BALLS-TO-THE-WALL ATTITUDE IS QUITE UNLIKE OTHER ANIME, AND IF YOU AREN'T CONVINCED BY ITS BIZARRE CAST OF CHARACTERS, YOU'LL BE ON THE EDGE OF YOUR SEAT BY THE TIME THE OUT-THERE PLOT REACHES ITS CLIMAX.



such, they're a valuable group of people for the pharmaceutical company Simeon, which has plans to take over the entire of the Black Spots throughout Tokyo and use those who make their homes there. They want to take control of the Needless, then harness their powers to create living gods they can control.

Of course, this doesn't sit well with Fragment users. They aren't keen on being used like cattle for another's purposes, and as such they work to resist in any way they can. Unfortunately, the rebellion is weak against Simeon, and the result after a long, drawn-out fight is a single survivor: Cruz Schild, a young man who ends up rescued by a traveling priest named Adam Blade. He's hiding a lot more than meets the eye, though.

Blade's Fragment is a formidable one: he can copy other *Needless*' superpowers. Together, Adam and Cruz work together to fight off the Simeon baddies and liberate those still under Simeon's rule.

A MOTLEY CAST OF MISFITS

While the series' plot is an intriguing one, as it wears its satirical nature on its sleeve, the crux of *Needless* is, without a doubt, its colorful cast. Adam Blade is our front man, a "priest" who's made a home in the church in Sector 533. He's large and imposing, with super strength and endurance, and a skeletal structure made of a metal called orichalcum. Along with his power to copy any other *Needless*' abilities, Adam is one bad dude. There's just one thing: he's too attracted to girls and can't stop flirting long enough with them to make a difference sometimes.

MANGA MADNESS

While *Needless* is available in both sub and dub formats with a popular anime series, the original manga run was never licensed and translated for English-speaking readers. So when you finish all 24 episodes of the anime, you may want to seek out Japanese volumes of the *Needless* manga for some great reading (if you understand the language) or some fan artwork to sift through, as there's plenty of the manga to consume.

Written by Kamui Ima and originally published in *Ultra Jump*, the manga series ran from October 15, 2003, through June 19, 2005, and spawned 16 volumes. There's plenty of story to consume, as well as differing points throughout to compare and contrast. So if there's a character you're partial to or a plot point you want to know more about, you'll no doubt find it within the pages of the manga. It might be a bit difficult to procure, but well worth it if you're a fan.



Adam's traveling partner Cruz is a young boy who finds his sister Aruka killed during attack in the Black Spot. He's a bit of a weakling, but he longs to get stronger. He's committed to keeping the memory of his sister alive any way he can. He may not be the strongest or most "useful" member of the squad, but he's intelligent and insightful, and often comes up with plans to enact for the friends he travels with.

And then there's Eve Neuschwanstein. Her name's a mouthful, but that's hardly the only thing you'll remember about her, even though she's absolutely awful at doing just that. She



looks like a young girl, which can be distracting for Adam at times, but she has an important ability. "Doppelgänger" lets her shapeshift into anything she'd like, including inorganic items.



She just needs to make sure she consumes enough calories to do this type of shapeshifting. That's where her handy cans of "Super Gel Dero Doro Drink" comes in, but she has to make sure she has some at all times, or she won't be able to transform.

Of course, that trio isn't the only set of characters to keep an eye on. There's Simeon's upper management too, the most devious of which is Adam Arclight, a mysterious overseer of Simeon. High up in Simeon tower, he carries out business meant to collect the Needless and enact his nefarious plans on the unsuspecting people below. But he sure does look a lot like the Adam Blade we know. Why is that, anyway?



FIGHTS AND FOIBLES
With the stage set and the players ready to make their moves, there's one thing you need to know about *Needless*: its battles are off-the-wall, over-the-top crazy. In nearly each episode, you'll be treated to some out-there



matchups that feel like the last-minute knock-down, drag-out fights you typically see at the end of an anime saga. Except they're here the whole way through *Needless*, from start to finish.

The Simeon Girl Squadron is particularly difficult to defeat, for one, full of women who you don't want to mess with. Kuchinashi possesses a deadly fragrance that makes people see their ultimate desire, while trapped in another dimension. Mio has superhuman speed, while Setsuna controls super speed. When working together, the group is essentially unstoppable.

But that's just a small part of the *Needless* you'll see along your way. Assassin Kafka's "Kandata String" creates threads that stem from his body that can be used as weapons. Hatfield can manipulate water with "Rainmaker," and use "Rain Laser" to shoot compressed streams of water at enemies. You never quite know what you're going to see next, but you'll always get one hell of a battle, no matter what.

ABSOLUTELY NOT NEEDLESS

Needless is unique in several ways, from its humorous approach to the genre, its satirical elements, likeable characters (even some of the villains), and plot that doesn't waste time trotting out stereotypical elements seen in other shows. If you need something a little different to entertain you and you're looking for zany, *Akame ga Kill!* or *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* combat, *Needless* is where it's at. Just don't be surprised when it does keep you guessing until the very end.

Needless is available from Sentai Filmworks.

NEEDLESS IS UNIQUE IN SEVERAL WAYS, FROM ITS HUMOROUS APPROACH TO THE GENRE, ITS SATIRICAL ELEMENTS, LIKEABLE CHARACTERS (EVEN SOME OF THE VILLAINS), AND PLOT THAT DOESN'T WASTE TIME TROTTING OUT STEREOTYPICAL ELEMENTS SEEN IN OTHER SHOWS.



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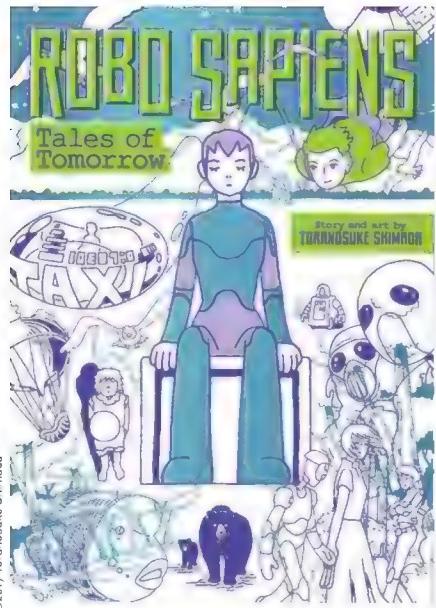
YOUNG LADIES DON'T PLAY FIGHTING GAMES

PAGE 39

Story and Art by Eri Ejima

Kuromi Girls' Academy is a refined, elegant school that expects the very best in deportment from its young ladies. Aya got into this peerless rich-girls' institution on a scholarship, and hopes to grow as lovely as her fellow student and idol, the so-called "Shirayuri-sama." But Shirayuri hides a terrible secret: she's a trash-talking, combo-chaining, newbie-stomping, ruthless hardcore gamer! Could a mutual indulgence in no-holds-barred video game combat grow into a deeper rapport between these two girls?

Available now!



©2019 Toranosuke Shimada

ROBO SAPIENS: TALES OF TOMORROW

PAGE 61

Story and Art by Toranosuke Shimada

In the future, robots are more than machines. Autonomous "cyber-persons" with A.I. brains are now part of society, interacting with humans while developing their own culture. In fact, they may be surpassing humans, as biological homo sapiens have begun to die out and give way to robo sapiens. But are humans truly disappearing, or are robots becoming the newest form of humanity?

This millennia-spanning, speculative fiction manga of interconnected stories, both human and robotic, was awarded the Division Grand Prize at the 2020 Japan Media Arts Festival.

Available now!

We are willing to bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Turn the magazine upside down to begin reading the first story on the opposite page. Begin on the upper right of each page, reading each panel right-to-left. No artwork has been altered.

MANGA SECTION STARTS HERE

FLIP IT OVER!

AFTER THE
END OF FOURTH
PERIOD, THE
STUDENTS HEAD
BACK TO THEIR
DORM CAFETERIA
FOR LUNCH.

AT
KUROMI
GIRLS'
ACADEMY...

KUROMI GIRLS' ACADEMY
HIGH SCHOOL DORMITORY

AW,
GREAT.
IT'S
ALREADY
PACKED...

AYA-
SAN!



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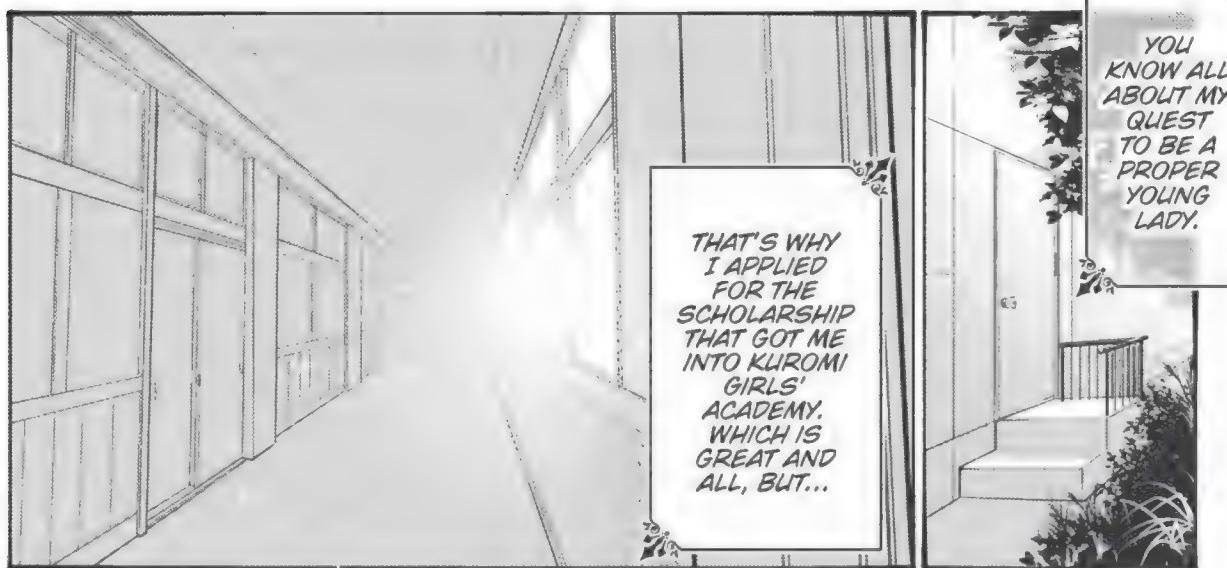




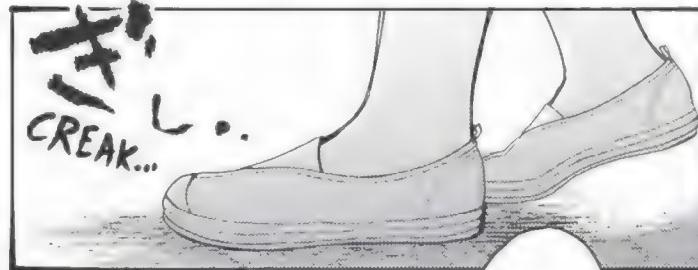


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YOU KNOW ALL ABOUT MY QUEST TO BE A PROPER YOUNG LADY.





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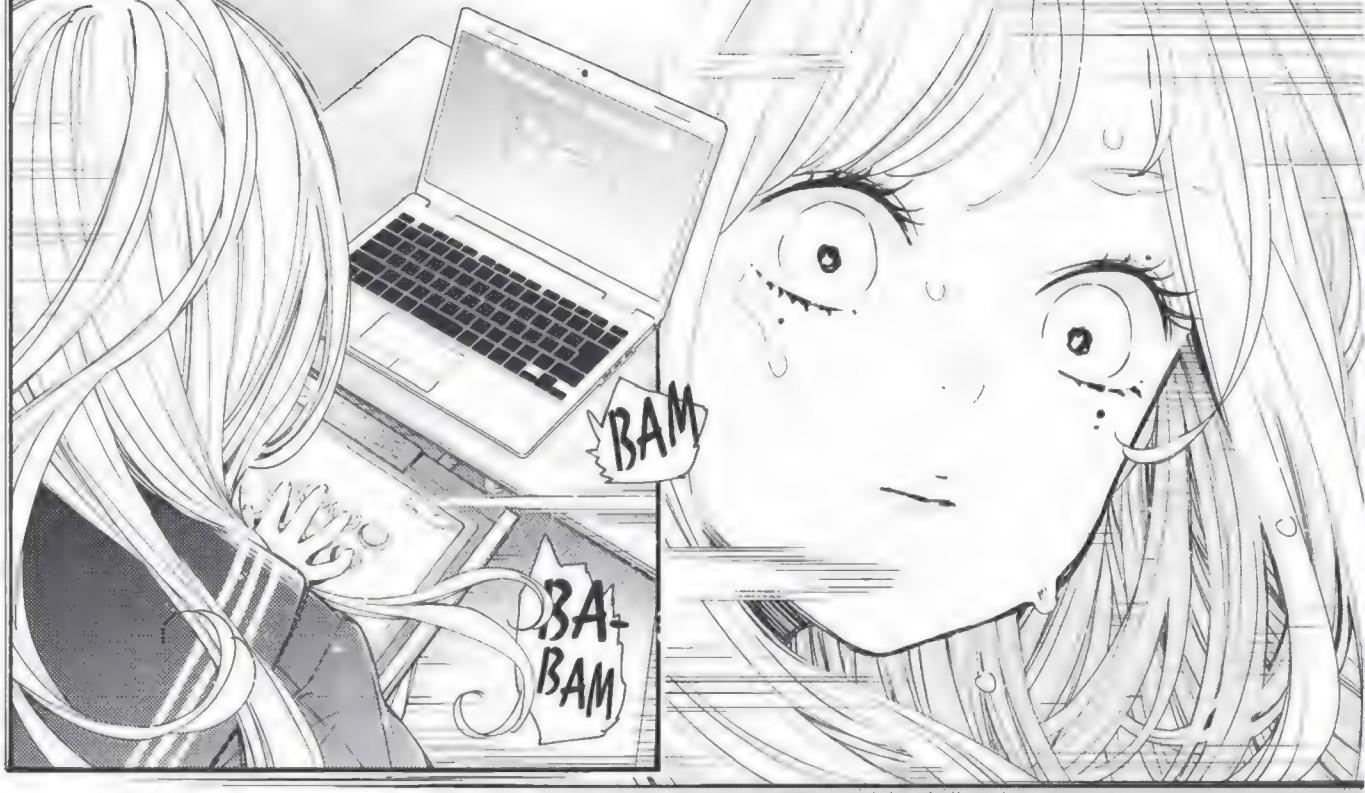


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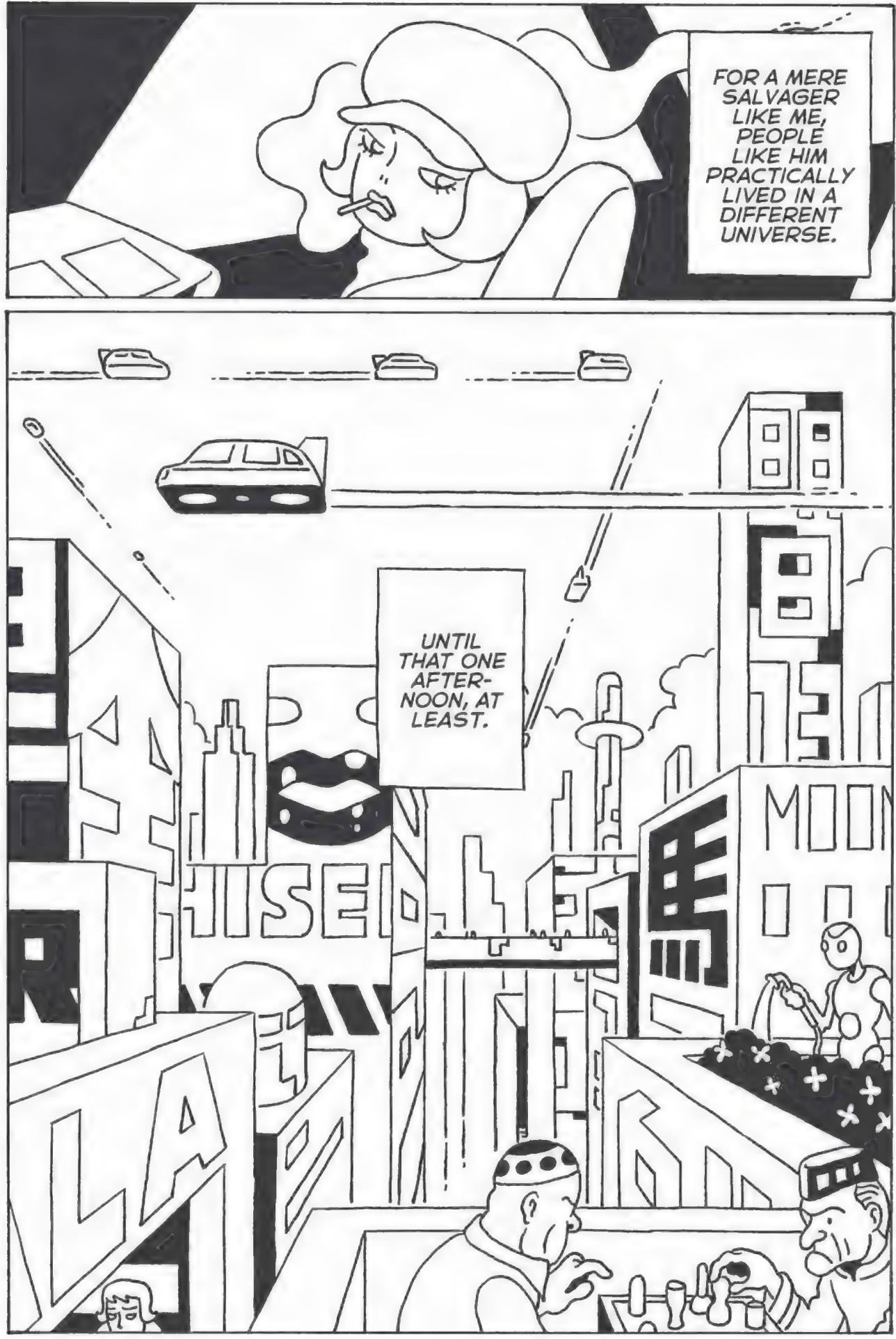
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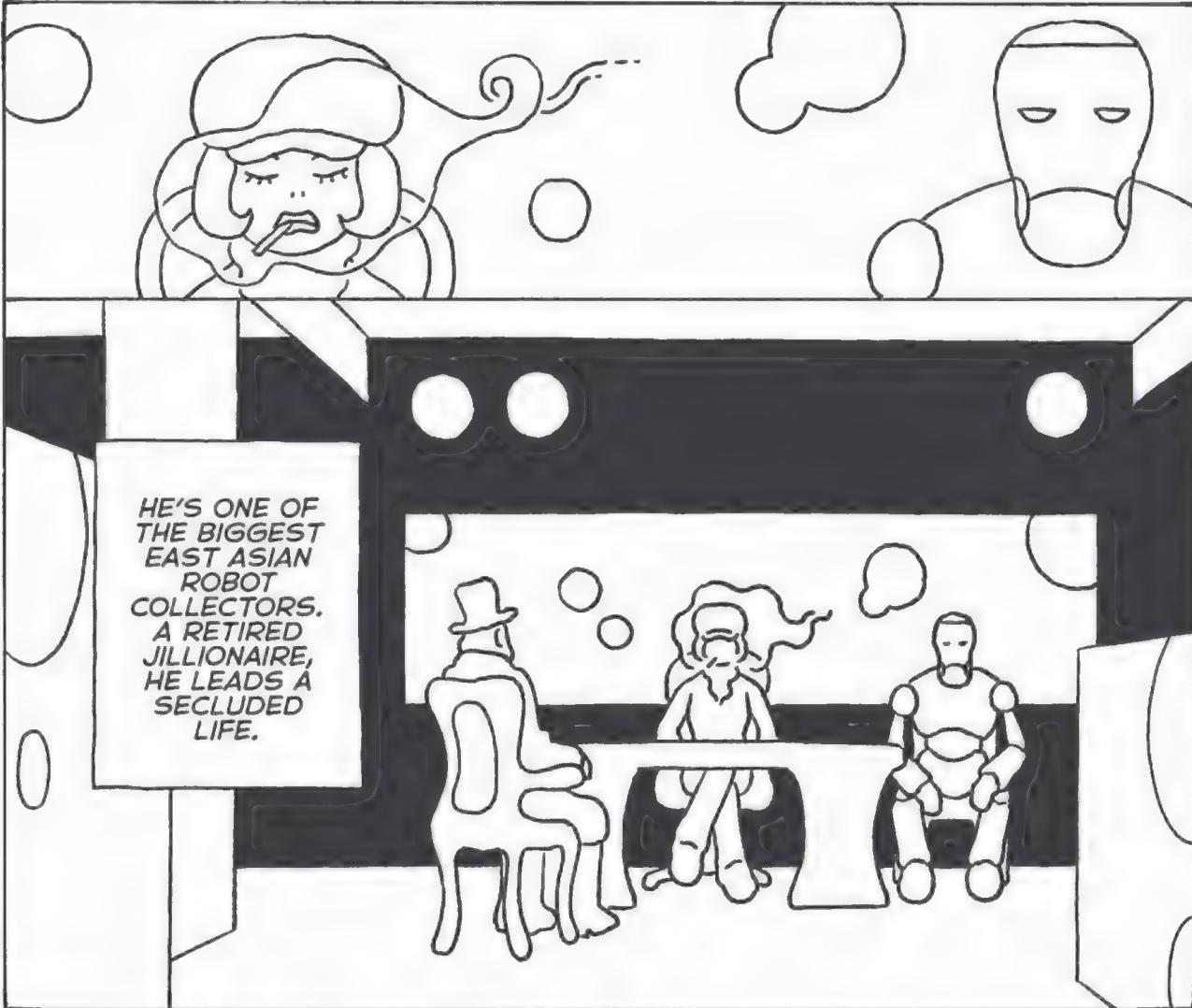
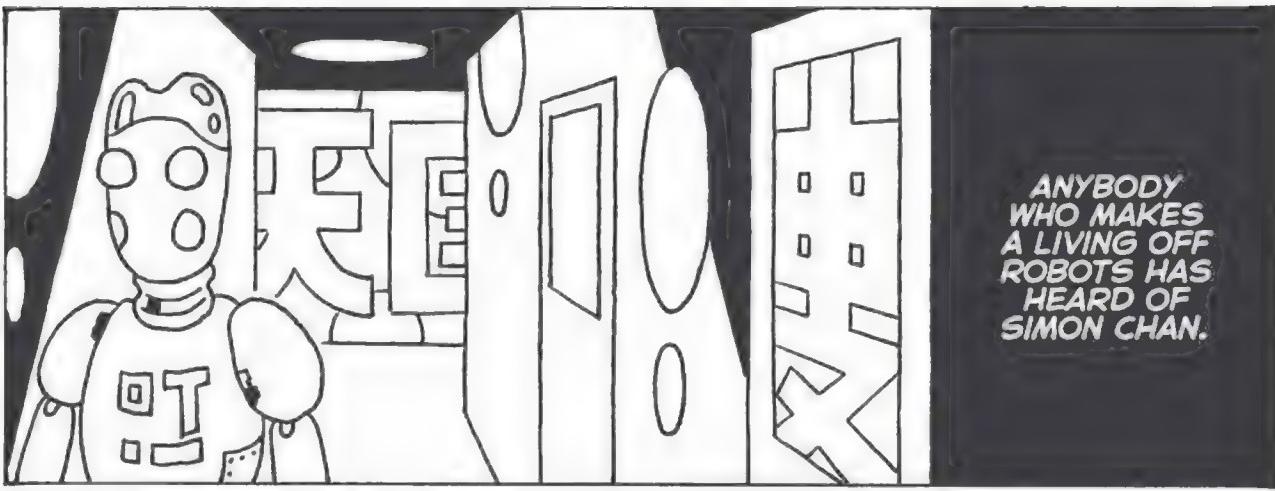
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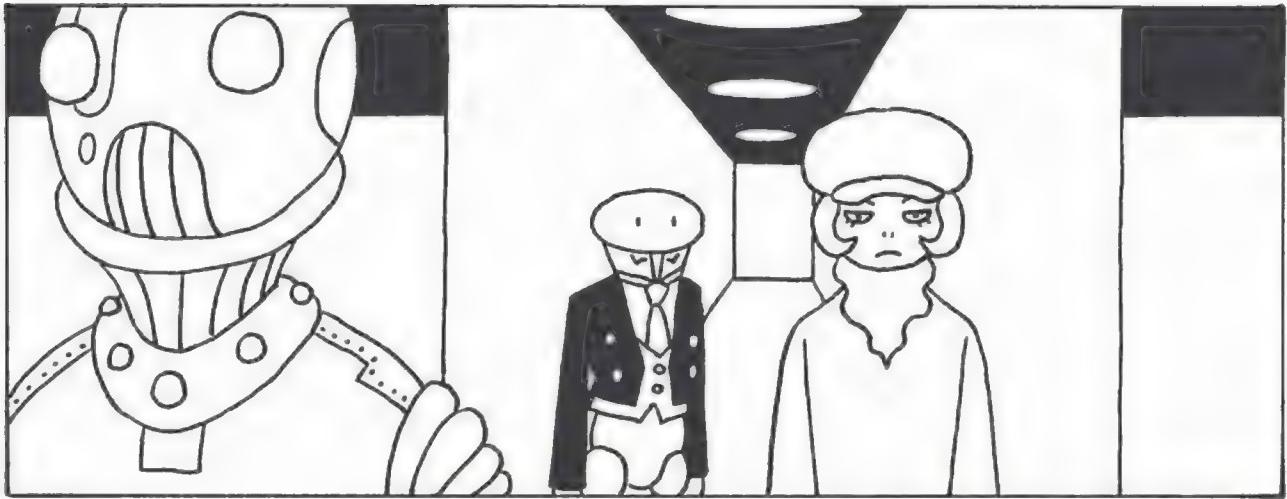
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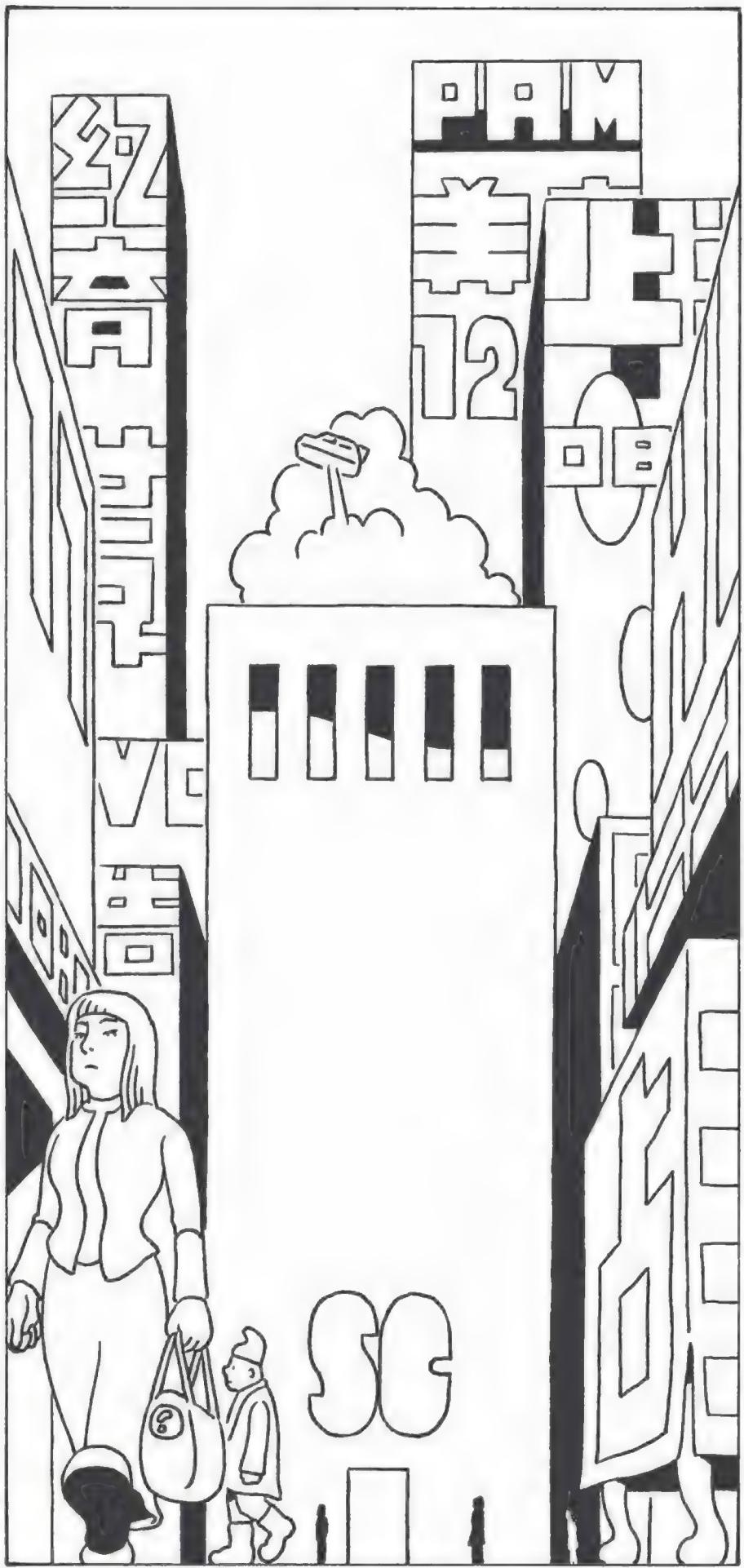
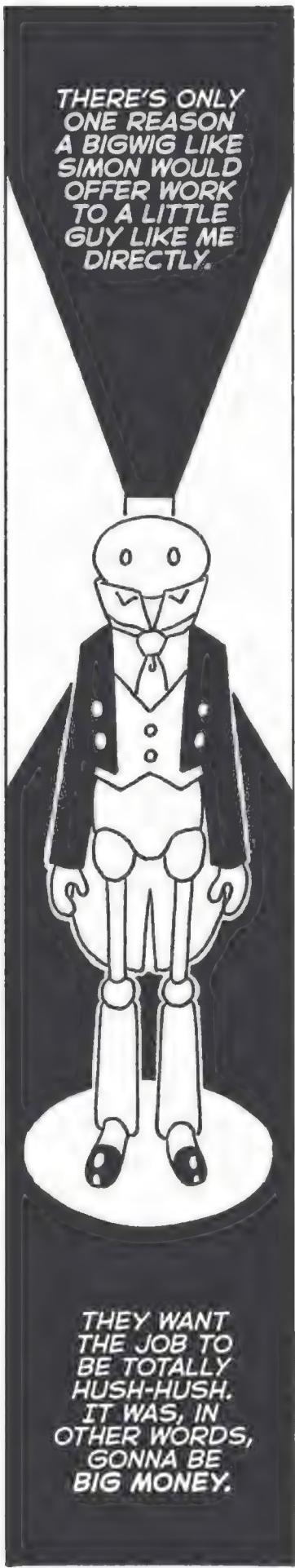
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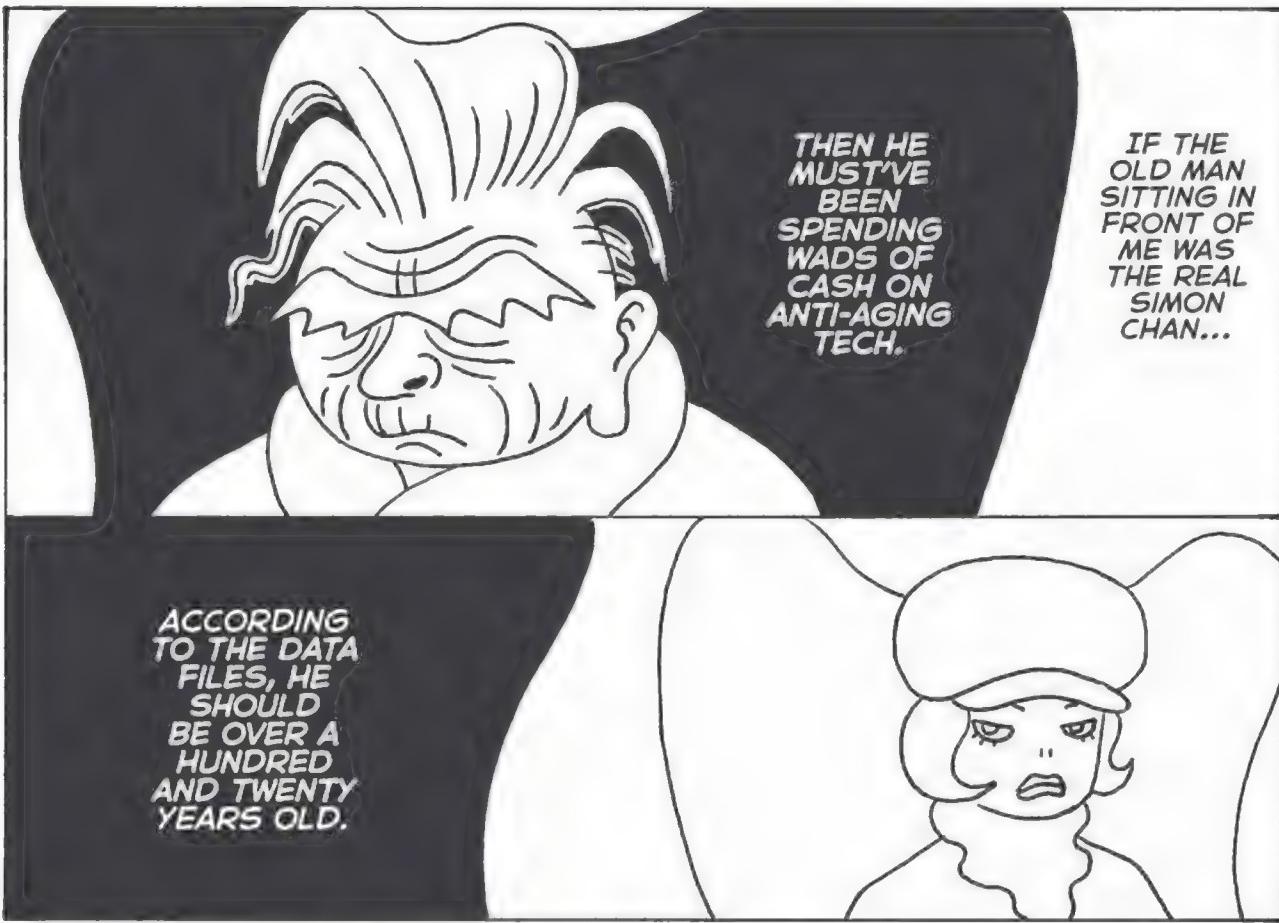
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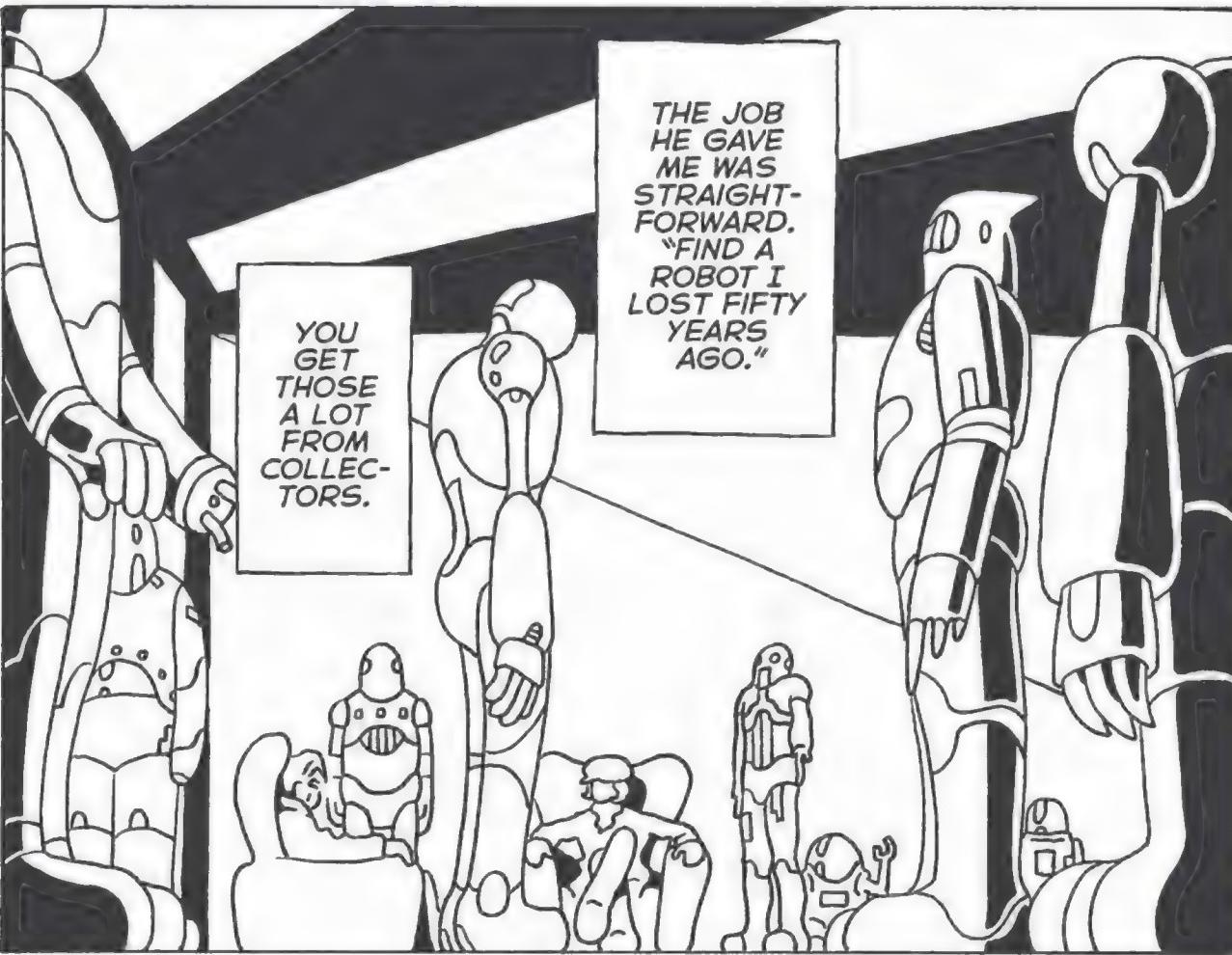


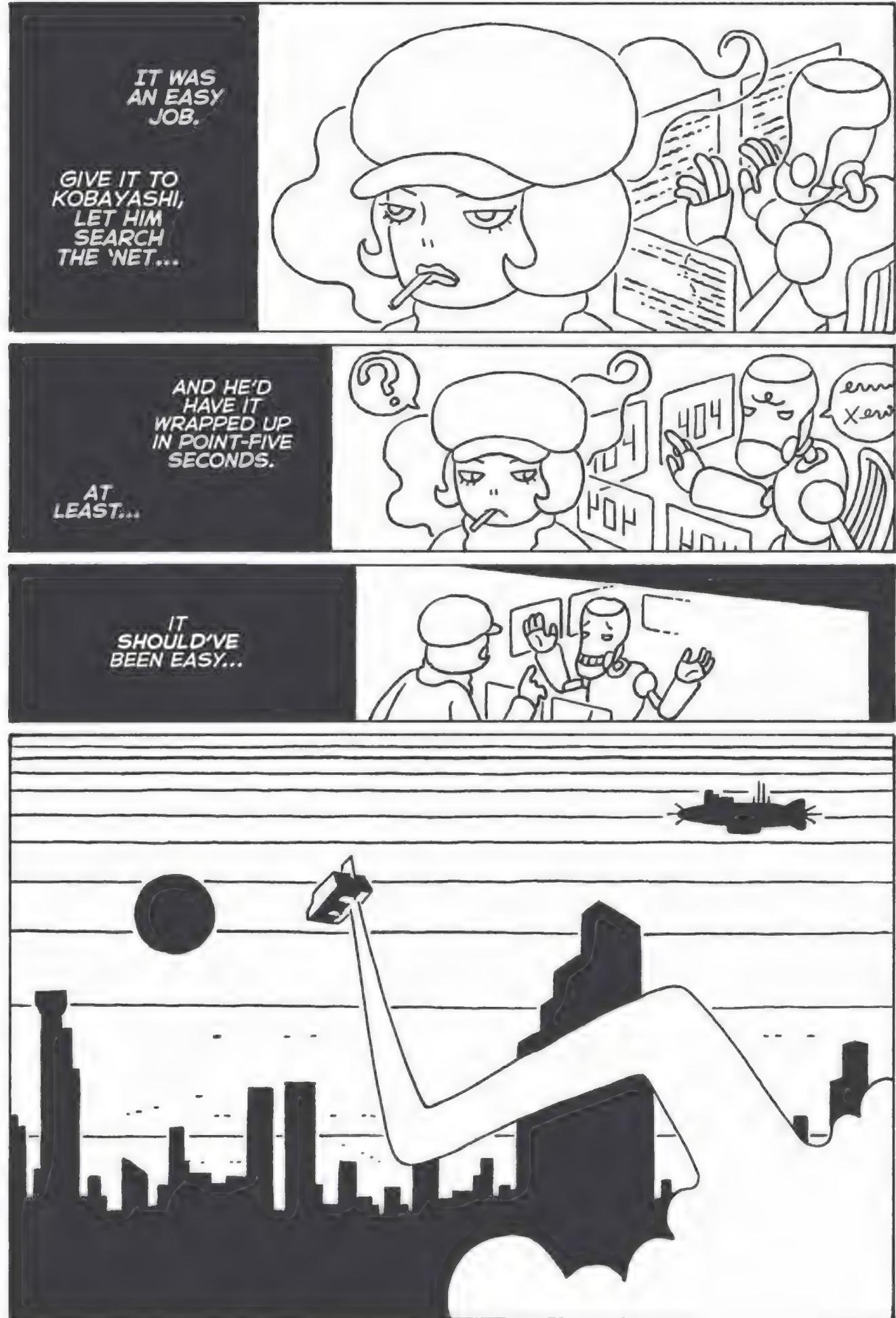
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ACCORDING
TO THE DATA
FILES, HE
SHOULD
BE OVER A
HUNDRED
AND TWENTY
YEARS OLD.





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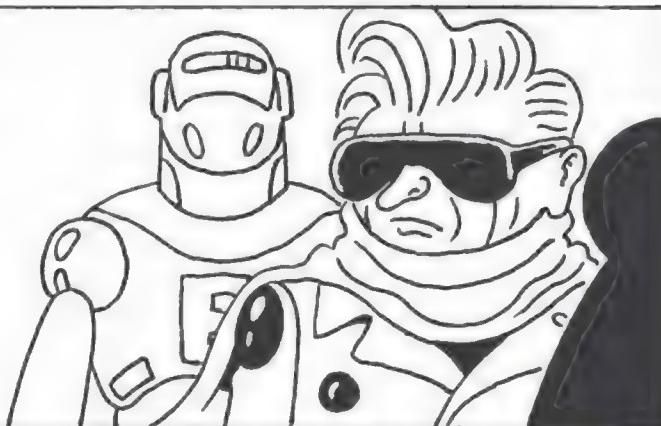
BUT SIMON
DIDN'T CARE
ABOUT THE
WORLD'S OPINION.
HE AND "LETICIA"
WENT RIGHT BACK
TO THEIR STAR
STATUS IN HIGH
SOCIETY LIKE
NOTHING HAD
CHANGED.

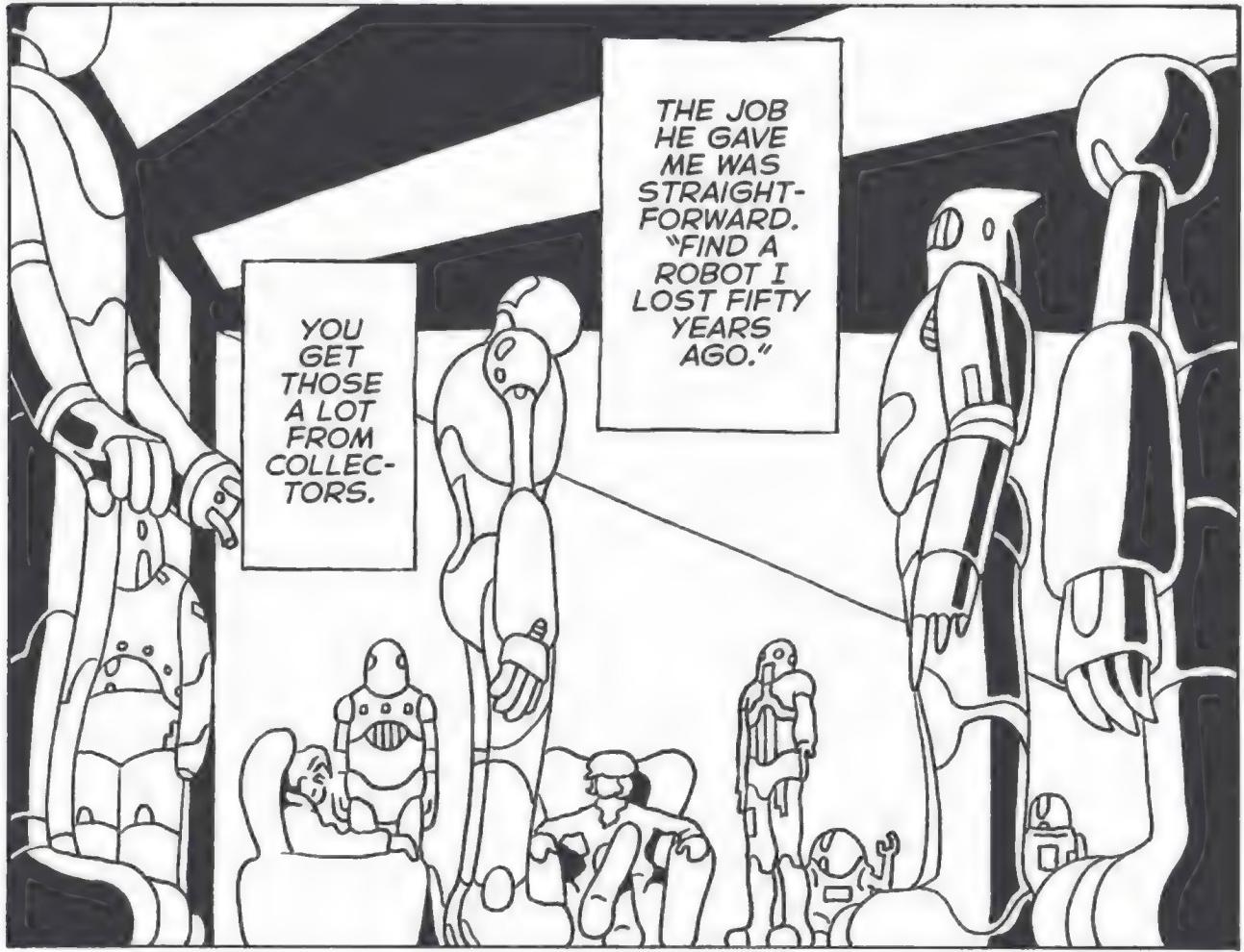
THAT CAUSED
QUITE THE
STIR BACK
THEN. UNLIKE
NOWADAYS,
MARRIAGE
TO ROBOTS
WASN'T YET
LEGAL.



MAYBE HIS
FEELINGS
FOR HER
HAD FINALLY
COOLED.
MAYBE IT
WAS JUST A
RICH MAN'S
WHIM. WHO
KNOWS?

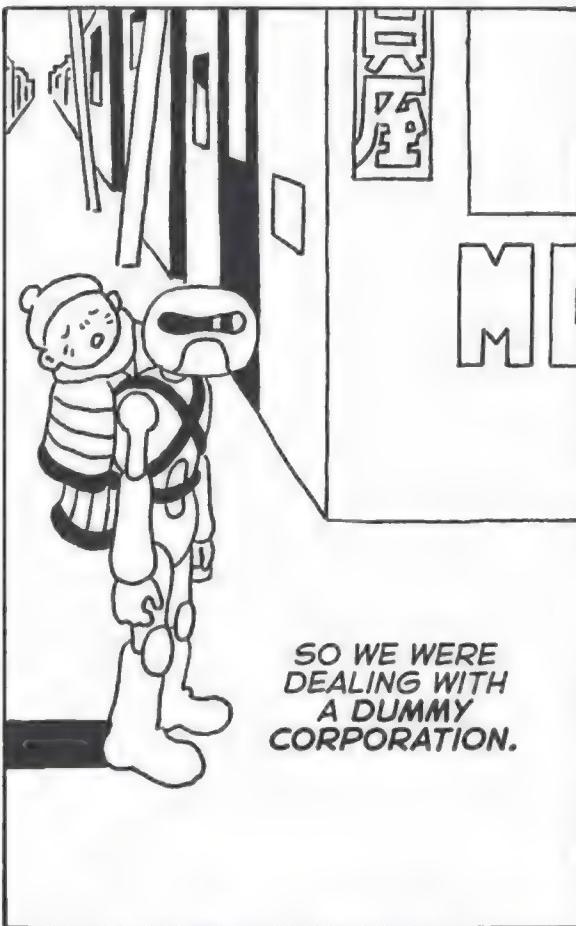
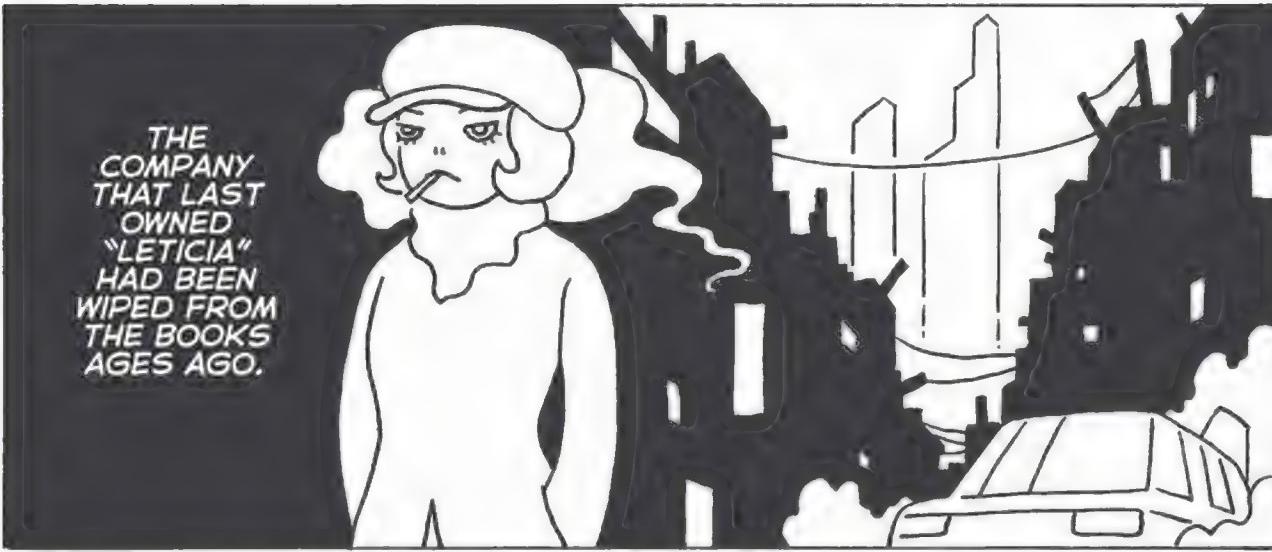
WHEN
SIMON WAS
SEVENTY-
TWO, HE
SUDDENLY
ABANDONED
"LETICIA."





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"I'M SORRY, BUT
THAT WAS FIFTY
YEARS AGO. I'M
AFRAID WE'VE NO
RECORD OF THAT
DATA ANYMORE."



YEP. THAT
WAS PRETTY
MUCH THE
ANSWER I WAS
EXPECTING.
BUT...

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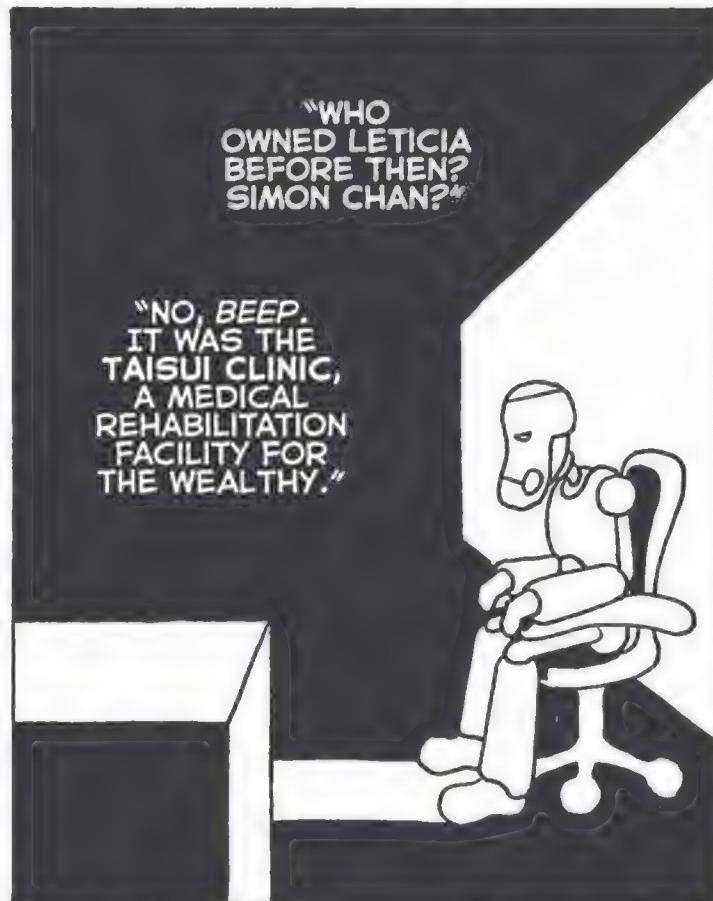
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"APRIL
14th,
2099,
BEEP."

"KOBAYASHI.
HOW LONG WAS
THAT DUMMY
CORP. AROUND
ACCORDING TO
RECORDS?"

"FROM
JUNE 1st, 2098
TO MAY 1st,
2099, BEEP."



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Rules, Rules, Rules. The official rules are on page 93.

Viz Media

Pokémon The Series: Diamond and Pearl Complete Collection (1 winner)

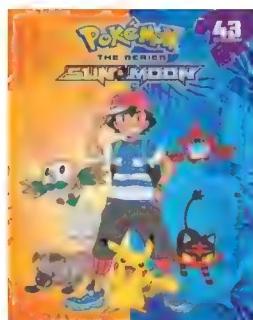


If Gary Oak is headed for the Sinnoh region, then Ash Ketchum won't be far behind! Ready to take on the Sinnoh League, Ash brings along Pikachu and meets up with Brock in Sinnoh, where the pair of Trainers are soon joined by a third—Dawn, a novice Pok  mon Coordinator determined to follow in the footsteps of her mother. Both Ash and Dawn struggle with their respective paths, but it's easy for them to make new friends, gaining new Pok  mon like Turtwig and Piplup.

This Complete Collection includes 51 episodes on 7 DVDs.

Pok  mon The Series: Sun and Moon-The Complete Collection (3 winner)

What starts as a summer vacation in the tropical Alola region turns into the next exciting chapter in



Ash Ketchum's quest to become a Pok  mon Master! There's plenty for Ash and Pikachu to explore in this sunny new region, with exciting new Pok  mon to discover and interesting people to learn from along the way—including the cool Professor Kukui and the fun-loving Samson Oak. More new faces will help guide Ash's Alolan adventure, in the form of a group of skilled Trainers—Kiawe, Lana, Mallow, and Sophocles—and a mysterious research assistant called Lillie. Frequent foes Team Rocket have also made the trip to Alola, looking to swipe some high-powered new Pok  mon. But they have some heavy competition on the villainy front: the ruffians of Team Skull, who delight in causing chaos and may have more sinister intentions ...

This Complete Collection includes 43 episodes on 6 DVD discs.

Special Features: Clean Opening and Ending, English Stereo 2.0 Audio, English SDH.



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K: Seven Stories features the untold back-stories and life-changing events of the Seven Kings and their clansman. Travel back in time to witness the first encounter between the Red King Mikoto Suah and Blue King Reisi Munakata. See the friendship of Misaki Yata and Saruhiko Fushimi grow as they struggle to find their place in the world. Plus, find out about the origins of the Green Clan JUNGLE, as well as the real truth behind the disastrous Kagutsu Incident.

2-Disc Blu-ray Set, 13 Episodes, 16x9 Widescreen Video, English and Japanese Stereo 2.0 Audio, English Subtitles

SPECIAL FEATURES: Clean Opening and Ending, Art Gallery, KANAME Gallery, Interview with Producer Go Nakanishi Interview with Cosplayer Kaname, Interview with Shimba Tsuchiya/Takeru Kusuvara

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Your favorite characters, stylized and squashed into a fun to collect palm size! Featuring lifelike eyes and simple posability, Figuarts mini is a spin-off of the TAMASHII NATIONS Figuarts brand. Now Roswaal's maid RAM, twin sister of Rem from "Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World," joins the popular series!

Set Contents: Main body, Optional arms, Custom stand

Release: January 2022



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Set Contents: Main body, Optional arms, Custom stand

Release: January 2022



Every Picture Tells a Story

By
Kara
Dennison

Iroduku: The World in Colors spins
an unusual web of artistic and magical influences.





Magic comes in all forms, in anime and in the real world—and not all of it is big and explosive. We make magic every day when we create art, tell stories, or just give our friends a lovely place to escape to. Those little magic moments seem inconsequential, but they can color a person's entire world. And when that person's world is devoid of color, every little bit makes a difference.

On the surface, *Irooduku: The World in Colors* looks like a mash-up of slice-of-life, fantasy, and time travel. And it is, to start. But the story it tells is much broader, spinning an unusual web of artistic and magical influences. It's also a love letter to the art of photography, an examination of childhood trauma, a gentle spin on urban fantasy, and a simple love story.

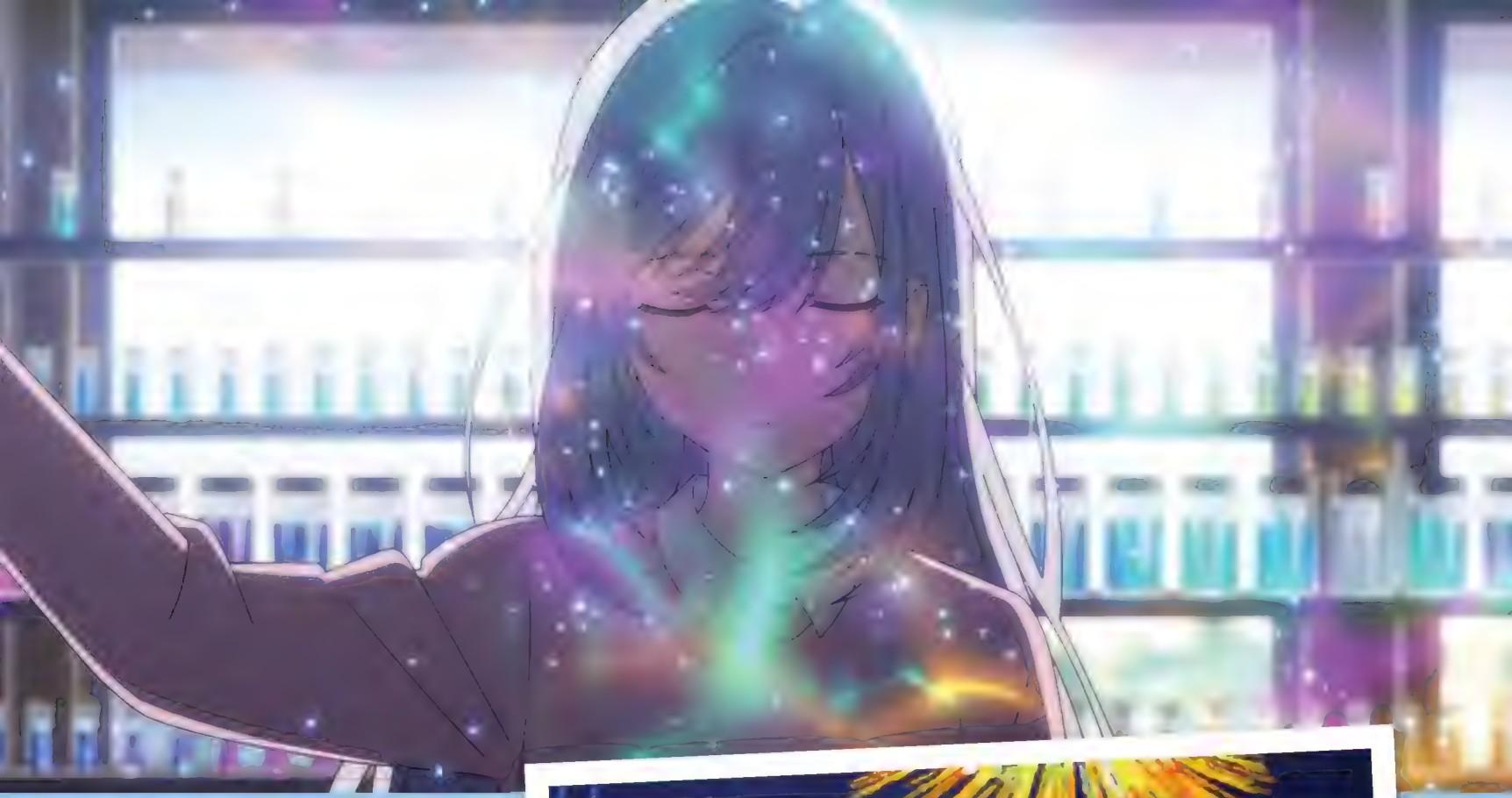
Despite all those things playing out on top of each other, *Irooduku* is paced like the most casual of hobby-centric anime, even in its final two episodes. While its heroine's head may be spinning, there's plenty of time to take in everything this show wants to tell us.

Development

Irooduku hails from P.A. Works—which, while bringing us high-octane series like *Appare-Ranman!* and *Umamusume: Pretty Derby*, is more usually associated with softer-touch series like *Shirobako* and *Hanasaku Iroha*. Like those career-centric series, *Irooduku* focuses on the group at the center of the action: in this case, a high school photography club in the year 2018.

But that's not where we begin. We start 60 years in the future with Hitomi, a teenage mage who both dislikes magic and is fully colorblind. Her life seems joyless, clearly for more reasons than the





few we glean in those first few minutes. Her grandmother Kohaku's solution? Send Hitomi back in time, to Kohaku's own high school days. No instructions, no explanations.

Iroedu's 2018 is one with a little more magic in its veins than our own. There are mages, and even magic schools. But most people know of magic via star sand: colorful powder sold by the bottle and used for harmless temporary effects. Even so, Hitomi's situation is played close to the chest. At least for a little while. Especially since it turns out that teenage Kohaku, back from her time abroad, has no idea what her older self was trying to do, either.

Hitomi only knows she's here for *something*. And she gets a clue to what that "something" might be when drawings penned by Yuito, a member of the Photography Club, stand out to her in full, vibrant color.

Candid Shots

Rather than leaning fully and solely into the time travel aspect, *Iroedu* becomes the story of the Magic-Photography-Arts Club (newly named because Kohaku's ill-fated Magic Club needed a cover). Desperate to see more colors, Hitomi follows Yuito into it. But she gets more than the occasional colorful drawing. She gets a whole cast to befriend — and, through them, we get a variety of views on the world of photography.

There's Asagi, who would rather spend her time photographing bunnies than setting up complex shots, and





The ultimate goal of Hitomi's trip in *Iroduku* feels fairly obvious: see colors again, love magic again, and come home. But, just as in real life, gunning for an all-or-nothing ultimate fix accomplishes nothing. Learning things along the way will get us there in the meantime.



fears this means her photography will never be enjoyed. Club president Sho, who specializes in grayscale photography, helps Hitomi see that her view of the world has its own beauty. Kurumi aims to be as good as her successful older sister, and Chigusa is here for a good time no matter what.

And, of course, there's Kohaku: a powerful magic user in Hitomi's time, but here a teenager trying to use her talents to make her friends happy.

This may be Hitomi's story, but all of them are important, and all of them matter with or without her. Asagi and Sho's complex feelings, Kohaku's drive to become the mage she'll someday be—those stories will go on outside of Hitomi's journey, and hers will go on outside of theirs. It's a mutually beneficial crossroads for everyone.

Calibration

The ultimate goal of Hitomi's trip in *Iroduku* feels fairly obvious: see colors again, love magic again, and come home. But, just as in real life, gunning for an all-or-nothing ultimate fix accomplishes nothing. Learning things along the way will get us there in the meantime.

It's gratifying to see Hitomi's past family helping her with just that. Star sand, the magical powder her family's shop sells, is sorted by color. It seems like a situation tailor-made to cause unpleasant, embarrassing problems. But instead, it becomes an opportunity for growth. Not only does the mix-up have unexpectedly positive results, but she also learns to classify stock by number afterwards.

Hitomi learns to inhabit a life in monochrome with at least some happiness, but it's not about learning not to need or want to see colors again. Rather, it's about balancing out her life so she can chase after the colors with a clear head.

Golden Hour

Deep at the heart of *Irooduku* is a story of childhood trauma—one that doesn't become known until late in the series, and that even then we find out only a little bit about. Even within the show, attempts to fix it or inquire into it are rebuffed immediately. The only thing to be done, at least in the moment, is to sit with it in silence.

It sounds strange to say that a series built around this degree of sadness is ultimately joyful, but that's exactly what *Irooduku* is. Even in that moment of discovery, where we see what caused the color to leave Hitomi's world, there's a degree of happiness. There's a reason for it; and when there's a reason, there might be a solution.

There's never really a darkness in *Irooduku*; just, appropriately enough, a lack of color. Life can be lived in it, and happiness can even be found in it. But it's that final push that brings the color back. It can be the hardest part of all, and the story doesn't shy away from just how easy it is to lose yourself—even to feel like you're disappearing—on that line between your old life and your new one.

Irooduku is one giant swirl of metaphor. Photography is magical. Magic is colorful and gentle. Color can be added to or drained from our world. Love and friendship are timeless. There are a million messages in it, but they come out to one in the end: things can get better.

Irooduku: The World in Colors is available from Sentai Filmworks.

Is This City Pop?

Irooduku: The World in Colors is set in the Japanese city of Nagasaki and features several popular and picturesque tourist attractions. Of special note is Meganebashi ("Spectacles") Bridge, so named because it looks like a pair of glasses alongside its reflection in the Nakashima River. You can spot it in the anime's opening.



IN THE Realms OF THE Unreal!

Were you a *Pokémon* kid or a *Digimon* kid growing up? While I was stuck in the *Pokémon* craze whirlwind in those days, I got up early every Saturday to catch *Digimon's* (specifically the first season) more coherent form of storytelling; those original seven kids that went to summer camp feel like old friends of mine, the sight of that old streetcar by the lake floods my brain with fond memories. It was pretty ambitious for a show of its time: something originally designed to sell toys ended up dealing with themes like chronic illness and divorced parents, even kids learning that they're adopted before their parents get a chance to tell them.

Over the last several years, the franchise has experienced something of a renaissance of nostalgia. However, the last anime iteration, a reboot of the original *Digimon Adventure* series, shall we say, left a lot to be desired, and that's all I'm going to say about it. Naturally, whatever came after that obviously would have to work very hard to distance itself from that.

And this brings us to the most recent television anime entry for the *Digimon* franchise—*Digimon Ghost Game*, which premiered in the fall 2021 anime season.

In the not-too-distant future, holograms of all kinds are all the rage all over Japan. Advertise-

ments, movies, eating establishments, even at the movies—they've become so ingrained as a part of the daily lifestyle. Which means, naturally, that it's only a matter of time before the technology starts getting smart enough to wonder why it has to take orders, right? Well, rumors and stories are spreading about the existence of beings called "Hologram Ghosts," sentient creatures that can actually affect the real world and actually harm people in numerous ways. How bad is it? The first Hologram Ghost we see literally steals a student's time, making him wither into an old man. So, that bad, apparently.

Thus, we're introduced first-year middle school student Hiro Amanokawa, who by chance activates an odd item left behind by his father, a Digivice (sound familiar?). That's how he meets the mischievous Gammamon, and just like that his entire world is turned upside down. Later joining the duo are Ruli Tsukiyono and Kiyoshiru Higashimaru and their partners Angoraman and Jellymon, respectively. Now they're forced to confront frightening creatures like the time-stealing monster and a mummy that kidnaps humans. And that's just the tip of the spooky-berg.

As I said, from the very beginning, *Ghost Game* does everything it can to distance itself from what we've already seen. This includes such things as



***Digimon
Ghost Game***
is a perfect
entry point
for a new
generation
of Digital
Monster fans.

By Michael
Goldstein



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setting the show in a separate continuity completely with no shared characters (but a lot of well-written ones) and characterizing the Digimon cast rather than the human cast. This is due to the fact that, as of now, we're only dealing with three kids and their respective partners. Hiro has a proactive and industrious attitude (all that's missing are the goggles), while Gammamon is more or less like a toddler that happens to look like a cute animal. Ruli is something of a celebrity on the Internet and is more social than Hiro to boot, but she's not any dumber or less proactive than he is, while Angoramon is very much like Totoro with a PhD. Kiyoshir is like an overachieving, superstitious scaredy baby (also a bit of a chuunibyou), but his partner Jellymon, I swear, has this habit of trolling the shit out of her partner and everyone else just because she can (she actually forced Kiyoshir to become her tamer). These are all really good characters, and they have strong-enough personalities to the point where none of them seem to have a schtick.

Not only that, one thing *Ghost Game* does approach differently is its fights—as in, very little emphasis is placed on the fights at first and more on the detective elements that the show's mystery-solving nature implies, which in itself is a *far cry* from the constant fighting in the last series (and that's all I'm going to say about the last series). In the first seven episodes alone, Gammamon is the only one to Digivolve once every other episode, and this is just when we're getting to know the other characters. But it's not just that; many of the fights that do occur in the show, at least at the beginning, don't escalate beyond a few horn and claw attacks before someone points out what the Hologram Ghost Digimon is doing is actually pretty harmful before pointing them off in the right direction; the second episode is a great example of this. The Digimon themselves are pretty fairy-like in this regard;



THANK YOU FOR BEING A FRIEND

Prior to the premiere of *Ghost Game*, Bandai unveiled last summer a new version of the classic *Digital Monster* virtual pet—the Vital Bracelet. It was basically a pedometer that allowed children to raise their Digimon through physical activity. It's certainly different from the virtual pets as were originally conceived, but not by a lot. Back when Tamagotchi's were all the rage among children (I myself confess to having purchased the old McDonald's toys long ago), Bandai decided to make virtual pets that were more boy-oriented, deciding that raising pets as pets wasn't enough. So, they abandoned the Tamagotchi's cutesy abstract designs and made them look more monster-like, replaced the candy with "protein" and playing with "training," and added the famous mechanic that allowed for battling them. Thus, the Digital Monster line of virtual pets was born.

they aren't actively malicious, but it's clear their way of logic is so alien to humans—they either don't understand what they're doing is wrong or they just don't care.

Ironically, all of this makes *Ghost Game* look like the franchise's highly acclaimed *Digimon Tamers* in terms of style and theme, not that that's a bad thing, mind you. Both series dabble in horror, but while the nightmares in *Tamers* were more imposing and existential in nature, the ones in *Ghost Game* play off things that children may actually be afraid of (hence the word *ghost* in the title). Not to mention, as mentioned above, the show's lean toward diplomacy rather than physical conflict, especially when you place this against shows *Power Rangers* and *Kamen Rider*, where the villains get blown up every single week. So ultimately what we have, as a result, is something that upgrades a property that hasn't Digivolved in some time while simultaneously giving folks without any prior knowledge of the franchise a perfect entry point.

So, when you get down to it, *Digimon Ghost Game* demonstrates the line between a kids' show and a good kids' show. Yes, it's not exactly *Tamers*, but it's certainly up there in terms of execution. It's not necessarily a radical take, but it's very competent at what it does. With consistently distinguished characters and genuinely engaging mysteries (and no real save-the-world plot, at least for the time being), *Ghost Game* manages to stand on its own, even if it's meant to sell pedometers to kids. I'm curious to see where things go from here.

Digimon Ghost Game is available from Crunchyroll.

With consistently distinguished characters and genuinely engaging mysteries (and no real "save the world" plot, at least for the time being), *Ghost Game* manages to stand on its own within the *Digimon* franchise.



Ten years into the
Jojo's Bizarre Adventure
anime, it's time for a
dip in the Stone Ocean.

CAGED BEAST

By
Daryl
Surat



IT doesn't feel like ten years ago that David Production's endeavor to create effectively unabridged anime adaptations of Hirohiko Araki's long-running Shonen Jump battle action manga *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* first began. Back then, the first five seconds of the original opening from 2012 showed a rapid motion manga panel montage of the protagonists of each part in reverse order, which means that for a few frames the first images fans saw were of Jolyne Cujoh, the main character of the 6th and final-ish part of the saga, *Stone Ocean*. (Don't worry, the manga is currently about to be on Part 9.) As an older *Jojo's* fan, having followed it since the 1990s OVAs, I wondered "man, what if they actually do it? What if they get THAT FAR in

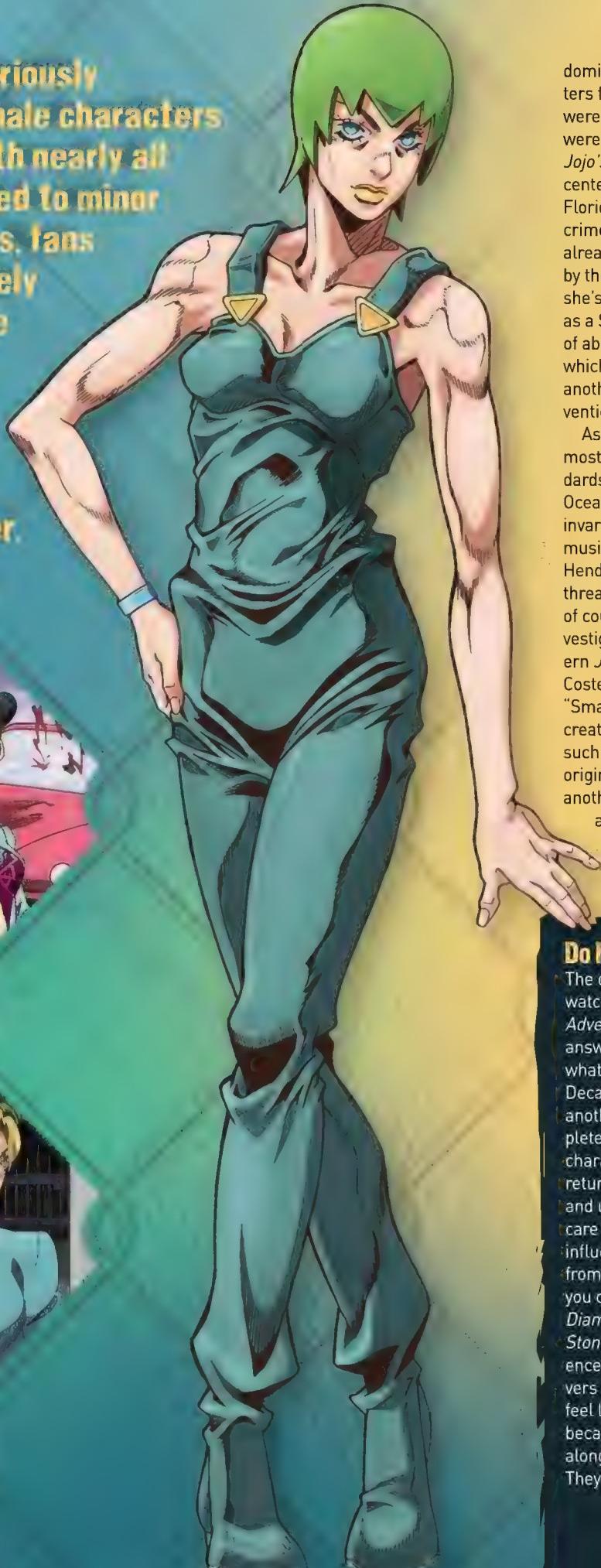
the adaptation, we actually see Jolyne?" It took a decade, but it's happening.

Set in the then-future year of 2011, Jolyne "Cujoh" ("Jo"-lyne plus Cu-"joh" makes her nickname "Jojo" ... but everybody calls her "Jolyne") is the delinquent teenage daughter of Jotaro Kujo, the protagonist of what was for decades the undeniably most popular part of *Jojo's* until Part 3, *Stardust Crusaders* TV anime came along. For years, the Jolyne character was perhaps more known than the events of *Stone Ocean* itself, as it was widely understood that the popular *Street Fighter* character Juri Han was heavily inspired by Jolyne, and Jolyne was also prominently featured in various *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* videogames. In a series notoriously





In a series notoriously dominated by male characters for decades with nearly all women relegated to minor supporting roles, fans were immediately intrigued by the concept of a *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*, with women front and center.



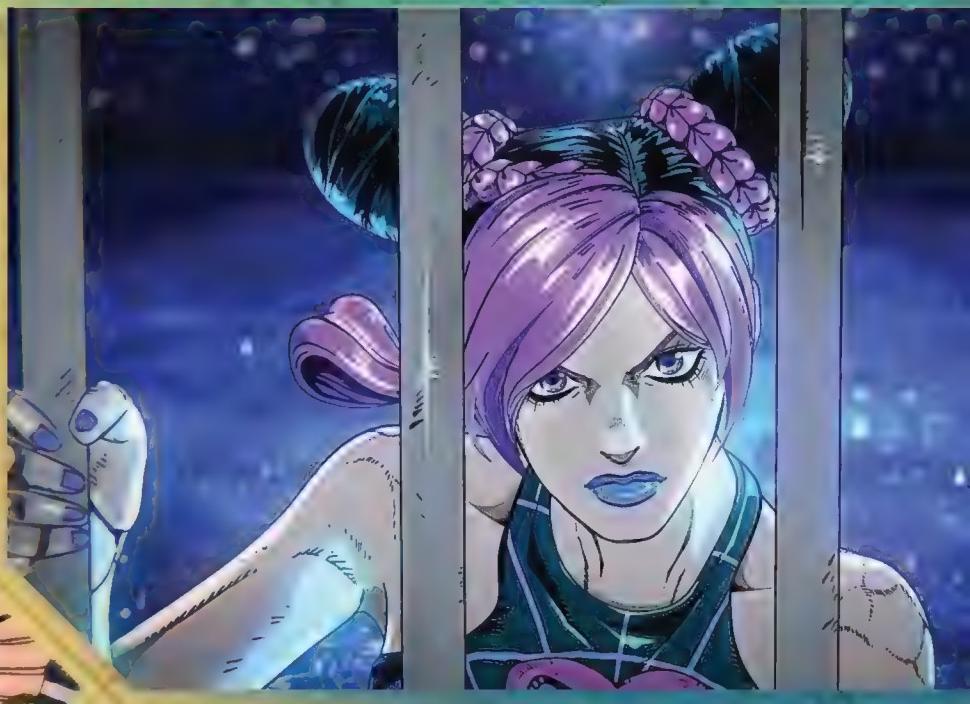
dominated almost completely by male characters for decades such that nearly all women were relegated to minor supporting roles, fans were immediately intrigued by the concept of a *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* with women front and center. For Jolyne finds herself imprisoned in Florida's Green Dolphin Street Prison for a crime she didn't commit, and if you haven't already been smartened up to this development by the last few parts, the inevitable happens: she's imbued with a superpowered avatar known as a Stand which grants her an idiosyncratic set of abilities, as are several others in the vicinity, which invariably results in their meeting one another and pummeling it out in highly unconventional fashion.

As the main character, Jolyne's Stand is the most conventional ... by Araki narrative standards, anyway. "Stone Free" (renamed to "Stone Ocean" because all JJBA Stand names are invariably a reference to a real-life song or musical act; ask your grandparents who Jimi Hendrix was!) can unravel itself into powerful threads useful for binding, eavesdropping, and of course punching people rapidly; it's the last vestige of *Fist of the North Star* retained in modern *Jojo's* (see sidebar). Fellow inmate Ermes Costello eventually acquires "Kiss" (renamed "Smack") which generates small stickers that creates duplicates of objects they're affixed to such that once the stickers are removed, the original and replicated object smash into one another and merge. Finding out what the Stands

are and do is most of the fun, but if you're wondering "if all these dangerous criminals have superpowers, then why don't they simply use these powers to, oh I .

Do I Need to Watch Parts 1-5 First?

The question always comes up: "do I need to watch the previous parts of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* in order to watch this new one?" The answer, as will always be the case no matter what toxic people online insist, is "not really." Decades tend to separate each part from one another such that the location is always completely different, as is most of the cast. True, characters from previous installments do make returns, but it's always in a supporting capacity and usually only for a cameo. So, if you don't care for Parts 1 through 3, which were heavily influenced by other amped-up shonen titles from the 1980s such as *Fist of the North Star*, you can just go to the start of the later parts like *Diamond is Unbreakable*, *Golden Wind*, or now *Stone Ocean*, whose *Fist of the North Star* influences are limited to the rapid punching maneuvers used by the main character's Stands. If you feel like you want to watch the rest, that's easy, because they're all available on Netflix right alongside one another. Well, for now, anyway. They could vanish without warning at any time.



don't know, ESCAPE FROM PRISON?" It's because of two key factors. First, there's a mystery to be solved as far as identifying and then defeating a powerful foe, whose Stand "Whitesnake" (excuse me, "Pale Snake") has the ability to steal and imbue both the memories and Stand abilities of others. This is the reason the heroes remain and why much of the story still retains the elements of a traditional "women in prison" narrative and social dynamic. Second, they're endearingly stupid because it isn't just jail, but jail for people in FLORIDA (I live in Florida and am therefore permitted to make this joke). This is the reason the villains remain ... and yeah, okay, also the heroes.

Personally, while Jolyne is a fun character, speaking from the position of an old fuddy-duddy whose favorite parts of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* were Part 2's *Battle Tendency* and Part 3's *Stardust Crusaders*, I confess that I was never the biggest fan of the events of Part 6's *Stone Ocean*, particularly not its notorious finale. As of this writing, only the first 12 episodes are out of a probable 39, so things haven't gotten really truly "bizarre" an adventure just yet. It's slightly less evident from the anime, but Araki's art style has shifted dramatically over the decades such that several of the minor male cast of *Stone Ocean* come off as downright inhuman, though that's to be expected for cops and lawyers. I suppose if I consider the storyline of the videogame *Eyes of Heaven* to be canonical, then everything that happens here is fine. If anything, *Stone Ocean* is a means to a necessary end, since without it we could not have the next part of the saga, *Steel Ball Run*, which totally rules!

But would David Production dare consider adapting that, now that they've still got *Spriggan* for Netflix on the horizon along with a reboot of *Urusei Yatsura*, the anti-harem anime that inspired harem anime's existence? After all, *Steel Ball Run* features copious amounts of the bane of animators: horses running!

Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean is available from Netflix.

Platinum End is the latest fast-paced, ultra-dramatic anime from Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata.

HEAVEN

By
Brittany
Vincent

HELP US!



Platinum End's Mirai Kakehashi is at the end of his rope. He's lost all hope, and he's decided he doesn't want to live in this world anymore. The young, orphaned high school student has made up his mind to take his own life, frustrated and beaten down by everything he's been dealing with. Just as he's about to do the deed, however, he's stopped by none other than a Guardian Angel—apparently, his own Guardian Angel, named Nasse. Nasse prevents Mirai from ending his life, and instead

bestows a series of special powers upon him. While doing so, she lets some deeply troubling information slip that Mirai looks to act on.

You see, Mirai hasn't been an orphan since birth. As a child, he enjoyed a happy life with his parents and little sister, until a terrible accident claimed their lives. When Nasse informs Mirai their death wasn't an accident, but murder, Mirai wants to enact justice on those who took his family from him and lead him to the lowly state that he nearly claimed

his own life in. With Nasse's help, and the particularly amazing powers he receives from her, Mirai is in a much better state. But everything comes with a price, and as you'll see in *Platinum End*, those powers may end up costing Mirai a lot more than he bargained for.

POSITIVELY ANGELIC?

After Mirai receives his powers from his Guardian Angel Mirai, he's ready to start using them to make some good in his life. He



receives a set of wings, so he can fly anywhere in the entire world he wants to, and two types of arrows: a white arrow that grant Mirai the ability to kill anyone it hits, and a red arrow to let him make whoever he targets fall in love with him for 33 days. He immediately puts them to good use by seeking out those who ended his family's lives, but after that, has no real aim or ideas on what to do to proceed.

You see, Mirai was at the end of his rope, so he felt he had no options left. When suddenly met with the freedom he's been searching for, finally released from the abuse he suffered at the hands of his foster family, he knew it was time to do something, but what? These newfound powers are simply unbelievable, after all. It turns out that getting revenge is something that can actually be done in a relatively short



Secret (?) Identities

Platinum End is the newest project from author and illustrator team Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata, who collaborated to bring the massively popular *Death Note* to life. Though the pair also worked on a second series together in the form of *Bakuman*, *Platinum End* is their latest work.

Interestingly, Tsugumi Ohba's identity remains a closely guarded secret. While his partner Takeshi Obata is largely in the public eye, Ohba works with a pen name. However, there's a bit known about him still—at the beginning of the *Death Note* volumes, we learn that Ohba loves to create manga ideas while holding his knees in a chair. You might remember that L does the same thing.

There's been plenty of speculation about what Ohba's true identity might be, but so far, no one's figured it out just yet. However, we do know he considers creators like Fujio Akatsuka, Fujiko Fujio, and Shotaro Ishinomori important influences and inspirations when it comes to creative muses. It's an interesting quirk that's fun to think about when appreciating *Platinum End* and Ohba and Obata's other contributions to the anime and manga space. And if you love *Platinum End*, you have other works to explore!



amount of time, so when Mirai finishes that up, he's left wondering if he should go back to school, or where he should even spend his days as he worries about who might discover what he's done in the name of revenge.

Thankfully (or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how you look at it), fate has made Mirai's plans for him. As Nasse explains, by accepting the gifts she gave him, Mirai has become a candidate for becoming a new God. You see, the current God is set to retire in 999 days. There were thirteen candidates selected as potential replacements, with Mirai being one of them. This forces our protagonist to go from potential suicide victim to a powerful candidate who must take place in a contest in which his life still isn't safe. Mirai quickly decides that if he has to participate, then he'll play this "game" without killing any of the other competitors—no matter the cost.

MAY THE BEST CANDIDATE WIN

Many of the God candidates are those who have been saved from committing suicide for one reason or another. Thus, a good portion of them have been through a number of ups and downs over the course of their lives, whether similar to Mirai's situation or simply being down on their luck. Some were just born without the good looks and good fortune they wished to have to get ahead in life. All of them, however, must work toward the common goal of finding a replacement for God.

After learning of his fate as one of those selected as God candidates, Mirai ends up meeting the others, most of whom who aren't exactly savory characters. In a surprise twist, someone very close to Mirai is actually a God candidate, and one that he never expected to be working alongside. But it's important to have allies, especially when you're up against a candidate who'll stop at nothing to get their way.

An individual known as Metropoliman is something of a "superhero" who decides to "save" others and stop crime under the guise of being an all-powerful hero. Under this alias, he's killed several other candidates, claiming their wings and arrows and using them for purposes Mirai has yet to learn he can also enact.

With Metropoliman running wild, and so little regard for the humanity and lives of those he's competing against, Mirai and his allies have to be extremely crafty, especially when they don't initially know their opponents' true identities. This leads to a deadly cat-and-mouse game that *Death Note* fans will find very similar to that of the interactions between Kira and L, with one always a step ahead of the other. And

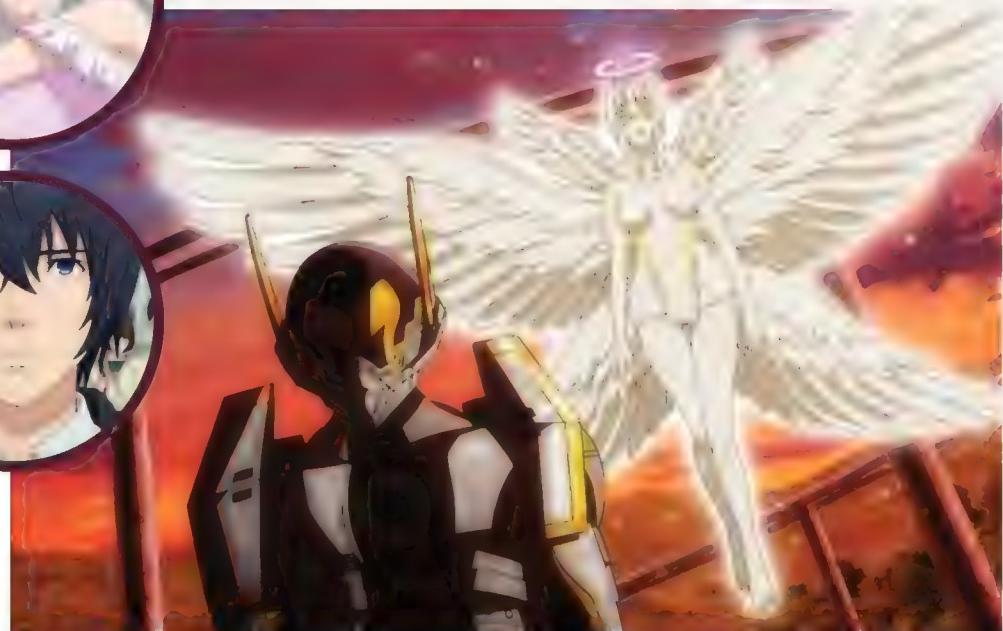
there are plenty of ways to force the other players into doing things that you need them to.

WHO WILL ASCEND?

Platinum End is a fast-paced, exciting competition anime that will bring to mind the best of shows like *Future Diary*, *Death Note*, *Darwin's Game*, and similar shows of that ilk. You never quite know who's doing what, who you can trust, or even if the "good" guys are what they seem. With that in mind, if you're coming into this series fresh, you'll want to refrain from reading anything that could spoil you on what's to come—you won't have seen anything yet.

Who will end up becoming the candidate who replaces God? And how many unfortunate casualties will happen as a result of this competition? Strap in and get ready for a wild ride, one that'll echo all the way to the heavens.

Platinum End is available from Crunchyroll.



PLATINUM END IS A FAST-PACED, EXCITING COMPETITION ANIME THAT WILL BRING TO MIND THE BEST OF SHOWS LIKE FUTURE DIARY, DEATH NOTE, DARWIN'S GAME, AND SIMILAR SHOWS OF THAT IK.

Along with Gamera

Yokai monsters and a turtle with rockets in his pockets



STUDIO/COMPANY
Arrow Video

RELEASE DATE
1969

RUNNING TIME
82 Minutes

Gamera vs. Guiron

Daiei Tokyo's preceding *Gamera vs. Viras* (1968) took the *Gamera* series in a goofy, child-oriented direction. By, released on March 21st, 1969, on a double bill with Daiei Kyoto's *Along With Ghosts*, the series and Noriaki Yuasa's direction takes on an Ed Woodsian strangeness.

Guiron is an indisputably terrible picture. It is worth a mention, however, mainly for some oddly ghoulish moments. Due to the popularity of space themed media thanks to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and NASA's current moon mission, an alien

in secret to eat Akio and Tom's brains, along with their knife-headed kaiju watchdog *Guiron*. Fortunately for Akio and Tom: *Gamera*, the terrapin friend to all children, is not far behind.

Some have called *Gamera vs. Guiron* "Like a children's film written by Hannibal Lecter." In what is one of the

American expat heavily involved in nonprofit work in Japan. William Ross called her a "truly horrible woman" in Stuart Galbraith's *Mon-*

sters Are Attacking Tokyo.

Guiron [named after the guillotine], was designed by Akira Inoue. Design motifs for the blade-headed monster included the deba knife, used in Japan for fileting sashimi, along with types of flatfish. The suit was built by Eizo Kaimai and *Guiron* wound up one of Inoue's favorite creations. For close-up shots, the head of the *Guiron* suit was used like a hand puppet. A new *Gamera* suit was constructed by Equis Productions. The creature



planet setting was decided on, though the budget was just as low as in *Viras*.

Precocious boys Akio (Nobuhiro Kajima) and Tom (Christopher Murphy) find a giant spaceship from an alien planet not far from their homes. The two board it and wind up on alien planet Terra, which orbits the sun directly opposite Earth. The planet is inhabited by aliens Florabella (Reiko Kasahara) and Barabella (Hiroko Kai), who plot

most deranged sequences ever created for a kid's movie, a "Space Gyaos" is gruesomely dismembered by knife-headed novel foe *Guiron*. Excised from American TV prints, the sequence invokes the later "Black Knight" gag in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). The cannibalistic alien babes' taste for the brains of young boys is straight out of the darkest Brothers Grimm story. Tom's mother is played by Edith Hansen (1939-), an





Along with Ghosts

Show on a double-bill with *Gamera vs. Guiron* in Japan, *Along with*



STUDIO/COMPANY Arrow Video

RELEASE DATE 1969

RUNNING TIME 78 minutes

Ghosts is a fairly solid and character-driven kidie J-Horror film with tokusatsu flourishes. Again featuring a cast of ghoulish yokai, *Along with* *Ghosts* is a semi-follow-up to Kimiyoshi Yasuda and Yoshiyuki

Kuroda's *One Hundred Monsters* and *Spook Warfare* (both 1968). Yasuda and Kuroda would this time co-direct most of the picture.

In the Edo period, the elderly Jinbei (Bokuzen Hidari), who guards a shrine to local yokai, is butchered by yakuza thugs after seeing them

protagonist, *Along with Ghosts* is fairly narratively engaging, with more focus on its human characters than yokai spooks. According to director Kuroda, the intent was to focus less on the yokai themselves and create more of a straight-up *jidai-geki* à la the Zatoichi films where the creatures just happen to appear. Once again, Kuroda brings well executed phantasmagorical spectacle to life. A sequence where a pair of yakuza thugs pursue Miyo and a boy (Pepe Hozumi) into a haunted forest is particularly striking. Another bit, where the silhouettes of a gaggle of yokai appear behind screen doors surrounding the villains, is one of the more viscerally nightmarish scenes in all three films.

Equis Productions and Masao Yagi would again model what yokai were not reused from the previous



with the dementedness of *Gamera vs. Guiron*, it must have given Japanese tykes a few night frights. Director Yoshiyuki Kuroda's next ghost picture would be *The Invisible Swordsman* (1970). After that, he would abandon special-effects



silence a witness. A dying Jinbei orders Miyo (Masami Burukido), a little girl whom has he raised, to find her father in Edo. Traveling along the Tokaido Road, a trade route infamous for its ghost stories, Miyo meets wandering swordsman Hyakutaro (Kojiro Hongol). Hyakutaro takes her under his protection as yakuza baddies hunt her for having witnessed the murders. A gambler named Sakichi (Rokko Toura) is ordered to kill Miyo but is unable and soon realizes that he is, in fact, her father. Sakichi and Miyo are to be executed by the yakuza's ruthless boss, but soon divine intervention comes into play as the local yokai are unamused at the desecration of their shrine.

With influence drawn from Daiei Tokyo's *Gamera* series per its child



two entries. New yokai include *Hyakuya*, a creature from Suruga Prefecture with the appearance of an elderly man and played by Sumao Ishihara. There's also the *Suisha Yokai*: flying, bloody severed heads that live in water mills and attack the villains. The final reel of *Along with Ghosts* turns into one of the most ghoulish kids' movies in cinema history. Seen back-to-back

filmmaking to helm the main units on *Mirrorman* (1971-72) and *Jumborg Ace* (1973-74). Kuroda later helmed the final *Lone Wolf and Cub* picture: *White Heaven in Hell* (1974). Eiji and Hajime Tsuburaya were keen on collaborating with Kuroda on an adaptation of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, but both died before it could be realized.

—J.L. Carrozza

was portrayed by Umenosuke Shimizu, an Ultra monster veteran, who would also play Gamera in the following film *Sinister Daimon*. Sequels of *Gamera* and *Guiron* were also built for some other, such as *Guiron* attacking Gamera's ship with its bladed fins.

For *Gamera vs. Guiron*, the production values and budget have been a dive and are below even Toho's '70s *Famic* Dull early attempts give way to sadder special effects sequences. The tokusatsu work by Yasuda is telekinetic-grade at best and very shoddy, marred by especially poor compositing. There's the occasional good shot, but the special effects are mostly clunky. *Gamera vs. Guiron* is *Mulan* but has more showy fighting moments. Another bizarre sequence features Gamera performing Olympic-style stunts, including swinging on a crossbar similarly to the famed "Ultra-C" maneuver. These gags were inserted because the Mexico City Summer Olympics had taken place in December of 1968. *Gamera vs. Guiron* would go on to become a smash success on the popular American comedy show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. *Sinister vs. Guiron* is the kind of Japanese monster-film this untrained American can often stereotype the genre as and among the worst of the classic Showa *Gamera* films, but far inferiorly for its really twisted content. The expert English dub, recorded by a little-known Japan-based firm called Vista Productions, is so awful it deserves to be heard to be believed.

—J.L. Carrozza

Gamera vs. Jiger

The 1970 World Exposition, Expo '70, was held in Osaka and was among the grandest events in post-war



STUDIO/COMPANY
Arrow Video
RELEASE DATE
1970
RUNNING TIME
83 Minutes

Eiji Tsuburaya. It would wind up among the most attended World Expos in history, drawing in over 64 million visitors. If the Olympics had shown Japan to be Asia's economic miracle, Expo '70 presented the country as a new center of science and technology. On March 21st, 1970, only days after Expo '70 opened, came beleaguered film stu-

dio Daiei's next double feature, consisting of the Tokyo-produced *Gamera vs. Jiger* aka *Gamera vs. Monster X*, directed by Noriaki Yuasa and the Kyoto-made *The Invisible Swordsman*, directed by Yoshiyuki Kuroda. *Gamera vs. Jiger* is, fittingly, set amidst the Expo, though Yuasa was not allowed to depict the destruction of any pavilions due to



corporate pride.

As Osaka prepares for Expo '70, a giant native statue called "The Devil's Whistle" is removed from Wester Island. Gamera tries to stop the removal of the whistle but is distracted by an erupting volcano. A giant demonic monster, Jiger, soon emerges and temporarily overpowers Gamera. Jiger attacks Osaka and Gamera follows. Gamera soon is defeated by Jiger as the monster implants its parasitic larva *Alien*-style inside the creature's lung. The usual precocious boys Hiroshi (Tsumoru Takakuwa) and Tommy (Kelly Varis) decide to revive Gamera by stealing Hiroshi's dad's submarine made for the Expo and entering the monster a la *Fantastic Voyage*. Will they succeed, or will Jiger crimp '70's opening?

Early moments feel like an in-movie commercial for the Expo. The budget for *Gamera vs. Jiger* was increased slightly, and the more elaborate effects work by

Yuasa is, in general, a nudge above the prior two entries. It's still, however, weaker than the higher-budgeted, more inventive work done by Yuasa on *Gamera vs. Barugon* (1966) and *Gamera vs. Gyaos* (1967). The picture's miniature work is its strongest suit, and the composites are improved. There's a particularly striking matte mixing Gamera, a miniature set and a wide, distant plate of the actors. Jiger's death ray is a fanciful optically animated flourish. Soldiers turned to skeletons is a macabre touch that looks forward to similar moments in Toho's *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* the following year. Most impressive is a long take, around a minute in length, panning through a miniature version of the Osaka Bay Power Plant as Gamera retreats to the shore. It feels like another one of Yuasa's finest achievements as special effects director. Noriaki Yuasa directly went to Daiei's president

Masaichi Nagata and begged him for more money to stage that scene on a full-scale special-effects set.

The monster action, however, is clunky. The Gamera suit from the previous picture was reused, though its head was replaced and its face was made a little friendlier by Equis Productions. Jiger was designed by Tomohisa Yano with a demon motif. Screenwriter Niisan Takahashi wanted to bring occult elements to Jiger's script with the Wester Island statue's curse, foreshadowing the "Occult Boom" that would take place a few years later with the popularity of *The Exorcist* (1973). Jiger's suit was built by Eizo Kaimai, and small miniature puppets of both monsters were constructed. To create the effect of Gamera's face and hands becoming transparent after being impregnated, the suit's head and arms were replaced with a transparent polyvinyl that was then lit from inside. A second, smaller Jiger suit was built for the sequence of Hiroshi and Tommy encountering the offspring inside Gamera's lung. The inside of Gamera's body looks a bit cheap; it's easy to tell the walls of his lungs are inflated balloons.

One of the weirdest moments is a mondo movie-style touch that feels thoroughly deranged in a kid's movie. To demonstrate Gamera's plight, a scientist (Jutaro Hojo) screens disgusting footage of surgery on an elephant's trunk to remove parasitic worms. This was not genuine but created by the special-effects unit with a prosthetic and live pig roundworms. Yuasa had it printed in black and white to make the footage a little less shocking. Sadly, while filming *Gamera vs. Jiger*, a member of the lighting staff collapsed due to a cerebral hemorrhage. He initially survived but died in the hospital after completion. *Gamera vs. Jiger* would be followed by one more entry, the atrocious *Gamera vs. Zigra* (1971), before Daiei suffered a catastrophic financial meltdown that halted its film production later that year.

J.L. Carrozza is the author of *SF: The Japanese Science Fiction Film Encyclopedia* and the upcoming *Japanese Special Effects Cinema: Godfathers of Tokusatsu*.

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Pokémon Brilliant Diamond/Shining Pearl

Back to basics



PUBLISHER

DEVELOPER

SYSTEM(S)

RATING

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl is a conundrum. As a remake of *Pokémon Diamond and Pearl*, it has that classic *Pokémon* gameplay and sense of adventure but lacks any ambition. You see, this is an almost 1:1

remake. Aside from the graphics, very little has changed, and hardly anything has been added. This is puzzling, considering how previous *Pokémon* remakes have been complete overhauls, which bring new content and gameplay.

The visuals are the most noticeable change that *Brilliant Diamond* and *Shining Pearl* bring, and they're predictably divisive. Instead of the relatively realistic proportions that *Pokémon* have taken since *Pokémon X* and *Y*, these games are chibi-styled. So, all the characters seen while traversing the world are squat little things. However, in battle, your character (and the trainer they may be facing off against) grow to the realistic size we saw in *Sword* and *Shield*. It's a bit jarring to switch between the two different scales constantly. It makes the game feel pieced together from half new assets and half those ported from the previous games.

The perspective, too, feels dated. When I first heard about the possibility of a *Diamond* and *Pearl* remake, I was excited that we might get to explore Sinnoh in full 3D. Getting to see the adventure from a new perspective would have been amazing. Instead, the camera is still locked in the same angle it was in the original, and



everything is the same scale, just in generic-looking 3D graphics instead of sprites.

Some new features are included in *Brilliant Diamond* and *Shining Pearl* that can be appreciated. You can now use HMs through the Poketch instead of teaching the moves to a *Pokémon*, which is welcome. The underground has also been expanded to the Grand Underground, which gives players more area to explore, more *Pokémon* to catch, and allows for expanded Secret Base functionality.

However, strangely, this isn't the definitive version of *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl* despite some expanded features. It's completely missing the content from *Pokémon Platinum*, so there are no Ultra Wormholes and Wild Area. With how little has changed here, I found myself wishing I was just playing *Platinum* on DS. I think sprites have more character than the sterile chibi graphics of the remakes anyway.

Unfortunately, some of *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl*'s shortcomings haven't been addressed in the remakes. Starting out, the selection of wild *Pokémon* is pretty poor. There's still a pathetic number of Fire-types



available. This issue extends to the *Pokémon* your foes face as well. You're still going to have to fight a ton of Bidoofs early on in your journey, which gets boring quickly. *Pokémon* also don't roam freely as they do in *Sword* and *Shield*. That means we're back to random encounters, a mechanic that is starting to feel very, very dated these days.

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and *Shining Pearl* are great if you



never played the originals and don't want to invest in a DS and *Platinum*. Unfortunately, the developers played it way too safe and stuck much too close to the source material. So, those who have played the originals will just find more of the same here. That's not terrible because of the winning *Pokémon* formula, but there should have been more ambition behind these remakes.

—Brittany Vincent

Danganronpa S: Ultimate Summer Camp

Danganronpa takes on the Switch!



PUBLISHER
Spike Chunsoft
DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
M

Known for its dramatic twists, turns, and bloody death game: the *Danganronpa* series celebrates its 10th anniversary with a port to the Nintendo Switch. Fans can re-experience the series thanks to *Danganronpa Decadence*. The anniversary edition jam packs four titles in one, including *Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc Anniversary Edition*, *Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair Anniversary Edition*, *Danganronpa V3: Killing Harmony Anniversary Edition*, and a new bonus game, *Danganronpa S: Ultimate Summer Camp*. It's a good deal for those who are trying out the series for the first time or graduates of the series who can't wait to get back to Hope's Peak Academy.

This collection is available as a physical game with all four titles or players can purchase the games separately in the Nintendo eShop. While the first three are the same beloved games that don't need much additional commentary, *Danganronpa S: Ultimate Summer Camp* is brand new to the series—and one that takes a completely different approach.

You won't find any brutal murders or class trials as *Danganronpa S* pivots from the

island for a relaxing virtual vacation. It tries to rope in fans with new bathing suit variants and for a chance to see the "ultimates" who would have never met before, now interacting one-on-one.

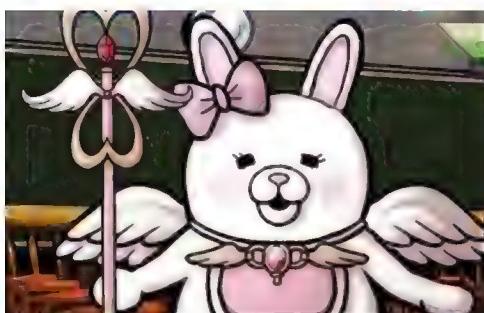
The game is split into two modes: development and battle. Development mode is where you'll spend most of your time trying to develop and level up character cards from the three main titles and *Ultra Despair Girls* (not included in the anniversary collection). You'll have 50 days (rolls) to strengthen your character's attributes and talents by landing on one of seven squares: growth, event, friend-



higher-ranked character cards to climb the Tower of Despair, and even that is left up to chance based on pulls. After a few cards (rounds in the game), the game loses its initial appeal. I found myself mainly using auto attacks, fast-forwarding through dialogue,



Every participant needs to find **Hope Fragments** or we won't be able to go home.



series' claim to fame, experimenting with a no-kill board game. Taking place on the tropical Jabberwock Island—which should be familiar to those who have played through *Danganronpa 2*—characters are brought to

ship, battle, card, talent, and shop. After leveling up and learning skills, you can build a party from your developed character cards in a turn-based battle mode to take on the Tower of Despair (a dungeon crawler). The premise is initially promising, but the gameplay is mostly rinsed and repeated, except for the 1000+ character events for a slice of fan service.

There's a lot of emphasis on unlocking characters, but sadly character cards are locked behind a gacha system that takes in-game currency. Should you be so inclined, there's also a machine that takes \$0.99 in real money for new character cards. But once gacha is added, it goes from a lighthearted bonus game to a grind for coins—a lackluster one at that. With over 100 floors in battle mode and 60 characters to unlock, there's a lot to do, but the repetitive board game doesn't feel very rewarding until you unlock

and purposely aiming for event squares just to see unique interactions between characters rather than trying to progress further on the map.

Danganronpa S makes for a nice break in-between the murder spree of the other titles, but for only a couple of rounds at a time. After the second time around the board, each round becomes predictable down to when the Monokubs appear to try and throw a wrench in the mix.

Compared to the other titles *Danganronpa S* lacks oomph and is hard to keep your attention for long. It's a neat bonus game but is a hard recommendation to anyone outside the fan base. Please do not make this the first game you play out of the series; you really need the experience of the others to grasp why they reached cult-favorite status among its players. But if you want to see characters in bathing suits, there's plenty of that.

—Brianna Fox-Priest

Deathsmiles I-II

Gothic lolit-'em-up!



PUBLISHER
City Connection
DEVELOPER
CAVE
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
T

There was a time when developer CAVE was on top of the world with its shoot 'em up releases, from vertical shooter classics like *Dodonpachi* and *Espgaluda* to horizontal-scrolling curiosities like 2007's *Deathsmiles*, which took a little bit of the gothic aes-

thetic and a whole lot of monsters and witchy magic as its inspiration to create another bullet hell extravaganza. A sequel followed in 2010, and now both are available in one handy collection on Switch for plenty of quarter-crunching fun.

The *Deathsmiles* games have a simple premise, and the story has about as much mileage as one

would expect from a tough-as-nails shooter. Event scenes are scattered here and there, and multiple endings await depending on decisions made and characters cho-



use, but the real star of the show is the bobbing and weaving you'll be doing as you zip about through the sky and dodge roughly one billion brightly colored projectiles along the way.

Each of the leading ladies has different advantages, but the gameplay is roughly the same no matter who you choose. You use two of the face buttons to change between shoot-

Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker

To the moon!



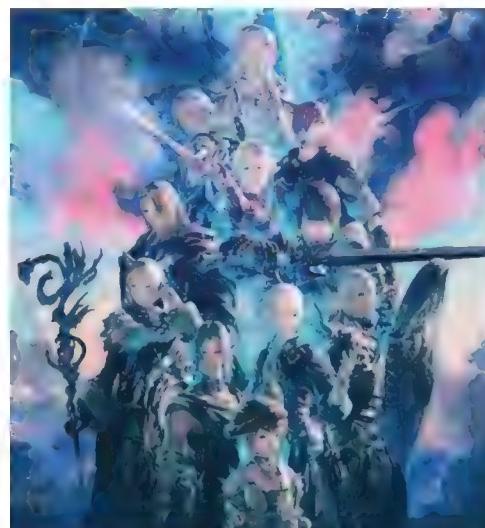
PUBLISHER
Square Enix
DEVELOPER
Square Enix
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
T

Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker brings us to the end of a decade-long journey. The Warrior of Light and the Scions of the Seventh Dawn can finally rest after this amazing conclusion to the MMO's first storyline.

The Main Story Questline takes us on a great ride, but I wouldn't dare expose anyone to a single spoiler. So, I will hand it to Yoshi-P and the team for giving their all and providing a satisfying

conclusion to this long-running story. There are a few hiccups, with the most significant issue being that the expansion definitely wants to get to the end of the story. The price it pays is that it sometimes throws too much at the player. In contrast to the occasionally glacial pace we saw in *A Realm Reborn*, *Endwalker* introduces some locations and then quickly takes the player elsewhere before you can really get your bearings.

My favorite aspect of *Endwalker* is a gameplay element added in *Shadowbringers*. Like the previous expansion, *Endwalker* dungeons



can be played with NPCs using the Trust system. I've always played *FFXIV* as a single-player title, so I loved skipping the queues. Furthermore, the NPCs you quest with are characters from the main story. It felt more appropriate for me that I was fighting alongside the Scions than three strangers.

Part of what makes *Final Fantasy XIV* feel so great is that it respects your time. While there are a few queues you have to wait in, for the most part; this game can be tackled solo or with friends, and that's given it a unique vibe that other MMOs can't touch. You don't have to

ing to the left or right, and you can also use a powerful targeting blast that slows you down—but also occasionally takes down enemies more efficiently and even makes it easier to focus on dodging, depending on the situation—and nuke the screen with a limited number of bombs if the stages get too hectic (which they absolutely will).

If you've played a horizontal shooter at any point in your life, you'll feel right at home here. What makes games like this and other CAVE titles special, though, is the care put into the intricately designed bullet patterns and the scoring system. Like most shooters worth their salt, it's going to take a bit to master the scoring hook, which includes multipliers based on the item counter and a fever mode that ups the value of point-based items enemies produce upon defeat. The best shooters typically have this type of meta scoring option available to those who want to climb the leaderboards or just want a more significant challenge beyond the action on the screen, and it's rewarding to keep a scoring



run alive by the skin of your teeth.

Even if you don't aspire to be the top player in the world, both *Deathsmiles* games are

worth playing for casual shoot 'em up fans, as well. The enemy design is fantastic, and once you get a feel for how small your character's hit box actually is (Hint: pay attention to the glowing orb at the center!), dodging even the most imposing spray of bullets becomes second nature. That's not to say it ever gets easy, of course. Even on a lower difficulty level, the final couple of stages are totally absurd. The final boss is an exercise in hitting the continue button until you've played it to death, and even then, it's a real white-knuckle showdown.

The full package from City Connection is a pretty no-nonsense collection of two solid games, but either way, *Deathsmiles I-II* is a recommended pickup on Switch. It's a fantastic example of how to make a visually complex and seemingly overloaded presentation remain readable for the player, and once you start getting some good runs in you won't want to stop. Also, hey, no quarters needed, so that alone saved me hundreds of dollars in deaths on this one!

—Joseph Luster



join a Free Company and coordinate massive parties to get the most out of the game. On the flip side, it's a fantastic feeling to head into a full server and see the huge amount of people hanging around Limsa Lominsa, Ul'dah, and New Gridania. It made me feel like the story's hero without the lifelessness that many RPG cities have.

Endwalker also introduces two new classes, Sage and Reaper. Leveling them gives players some great new goals to focus on as they play the new content. *Endwalker*'s signature job is the Paladin, but I found myself gravitating toward the Reaper as it has a similar aesthetic to the Dark Knight while having DPS-style gameplay. On the other hand, Sages are healers that basically use the bits from *Gundam* to heal and attack. I haven't gotten too far into this class yet, but they look fantastic

with those tiny blades zip-zapping around.

Some existing jobs got reworks too. Summoners, in particular, are practically a different class. Gathering also got streamlined, with recipes being changed and condensed to use a smaller array of materials. It's a lot less confusing to manage your inventory now and did a great job of sweeping up some of the clutter. It had to be an undertaking, too, as each Discipline of the Hand and Discipline of the Land impacts all the others.

Those who have stuck with the game over the years will love *Endwalker*, but it also gives new players a great goal. The first story is



complete, so even though there are plenty of endgame activities to explore, you can essentially play the game from "beginning to end." Now is the best time to get into *FFXIV*, and in a time where other games are selling battle passes every few months and have micro-transactions and DLC, an MMO subscription fee gives you more content for less money.

—Brittany Vincent

Monster Rancher 1 & 2 DX

Lost and found



PUBLISHER

Koei Tecmo

DEVELOPER

Koei Tecmo

SYSTEM(S)

Switch

RATING

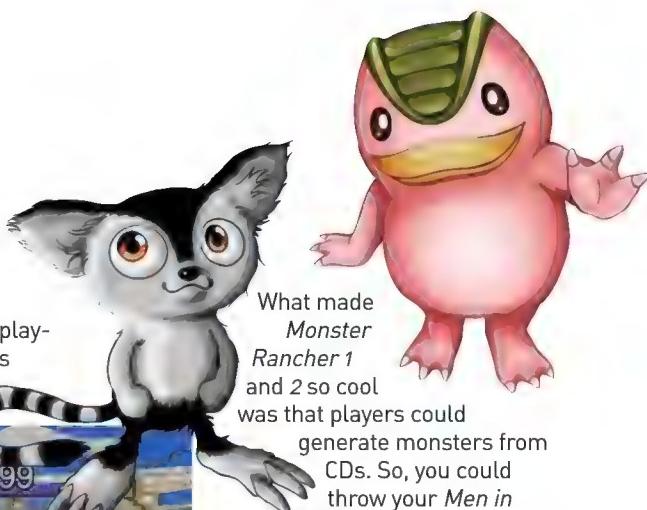
E

Before *Pokémon* hit Western shores, there was *Monster Rancher*. This monster-collecting series has players battling against trainers around the world. Its unique mechanics (which made imagining a modern port difficult) continue to endear it to fans. Despite a major gameplay element centering around the PlayStation's CD-ROM drive, all the monstery goodness of the first two games managed to be translated to the Switch fairly faithfully in *Monster Rancher 1 & 2 DX*.

Unlike the anime, which has a storyline featuring the evil Moo, the games are a lot more laid back. You take the role of a newly licensed monster breeder, and your aim is to become the best trainer in the world. To do this, you have to fight your way up the ranks by

entering your monsters into tournaments and winning. However, to do that, you'll need to get some monsters first.

Fortunately, the gameplay feature that players remember most about these games is back in a slightly different form.



What made *Monster Rancher 1* and *2* so cool was that players could generate monsters from CDs. So, you could throw your *Men in Black* soundtrack in your PlayStation and get Tiger (which is actually a wolf) or your copy of *Crash Bandicoot* for a sweet dinosaur. I spent hours as a girl seeing what CDs made would score me which monster, and I was wondering how that would translate to the Switch (which obviously doesn't have a CD drive).

In *Monster Rancher 1 & 2 DX*, instead of using a physical CD, you can select an album from a database. Fortunately, the game generates the same monsters with

Shovel Knight: Pocket Dungeon

Keep shovelin' it!



PUBLISHER

Yacht Club Games

DEVELOPER

Yacht Club Games

SYSTEM(S)

Switch, PC, Mac

RATING

Released seemingly an eternity ago at this point—in reality it was 2014, so not far off!—*Shovel Knight* went on to become one of the most influential indie games of all time. The pixelated platforming, level design, soundtrack, and visual prowess exhibited by Yacht Club Games still echoes through the indie world and can be seen in countless inspirational offspring, and its success means the days have spent the better part of a decade fine-tuning and adding new content. While we've yet to get a new game or sequel from Yacht Club, the company recently co-created and published a spinoff with developer Vile that takes the titular *Shovel Knight* in a puzzling new direction.

Shovel Knight: Pocket Dungeon is a beautifully designed mix of the shovel-attacking gameplay for which *Shovel Knight* is known and a puzzler akin to the *Puyo Puyo* series. It tasks players with matching up blocks and

enemies while moving Shovel Knight around a small area, ultimately taking everything out before it fills the screen and unlocks enough tributes, chests, or moves on to the next. Easy peasy, right?

As simple as it sounds, the core gameplay mode of *Pocket Dungeon* is pretty challenging. Until you get the hang of moving, lining up enemies, to take out a bunch without being dealt too much damage yourself, managing health pickups, and keeping the board relatively uncluttered, you're going to die a lot. The main mode implements a roulette system, as well, so dying means going back to the hub zone and starting your journey from that



point all over again.

Enemies can have a few hits to defeat, and different foes will hit you with different levels of damage in return whenever you strike, so it's important to dip back and grab potions before you run out of health too quickly. Every time you move, the blocks and ene-



this system that it did with the original. So, there's no guesswork to obtaining your favorite monsters. Interestingly, new entries have been added to the database that weren't available in

the original, which adds surprises even for the most seasoned *Monster Rancher* player.

The biggest drawback to *Monster Rancher 1 & 2 DX* will also be part of its charm for long-time fans. These remasters take a very light touch. There are a few quality-of-life improvements, like more save slots and some graphic filtering.

However, these games continue to be the obtuse and slightly awkward titles

they were when they launched on the PS1 over 20 years ago.

It's still a ton of fun to raise all the weird and wonderful creatures you encounter, but the format of the game won't appeal to all. This isn't *Pokémon*, and monsters aren't portrayed as your best friends. You're a rancher, and these are livestock. There are also



no elemental weaknesses when it comes to battling, so there's less emphasis on tactics. Additionally, time moves in the game, and monsters have a finite lifespan. As such, *Monster Rancher* lacks some of the camaraderie that other monster-raising titles emphasize.

The game's challenge is raising a monster through the ranks before it gets too old. Making max rank is a difficult balance of training, breeding, and fusion. Every trainer will eventually find themselves in a situation where their prize monster is on the cusp of retirement when it feels like they're just starting to realize their potential.

There's a lot of reward to be found in both games for those who take the time to learn the ins and outs of the dense gameplay systems within. Of course, the first two *Monster Rancher* games aren't for everyone, but *Monster Rancher 1 & 2 DX* shows that they've aged a lot better than you'd think.

—Brittany Vincent



times at the top of the screen automatically scroll down one level, too, giving you an incentive to wait and play out a few moves to line up a bunch of enemies and clear out big clusters in a few swift strikes.

It's a delicate balance, and the more *Pocket Dungeon* rushes your next move, the more likely you are to make a mistake, or not pay close enough attention to your dwindling health bar. Throw in Relics, buffs, gem multipliers, and other wrinkles and you soon have a fairly complex system that takes time and patience to master. Doing so is rewarding,

enough on its own, and the sharp visuals make progressing through the main story a true joy.

Those who don't want to play the roulette take on *Pocket Dungeon* can choose a different option to play it more like a traditional puzzle game, so there's no pressure if the default style is too intense for too other. Some let you to get into objectives. You can also forge the one-and-done rogue-like nature of the main game in favor of infinite stock, and the only thing you'll be locked out of is earning Trophies. You'll still be able to clear the



game and enjoy the story as it was meant to be experienced, so don't feel bad if you want to go a little easier on yourself in your initial playthrough.

I wasn't expecting *Shovel Knight: Pocket Dungeon* to pack the intense punch it does by a longshot. I'm glad all the options are in place, however, and I'm much happier to try out the tougher modes now that I have a better grasp on the core mechanics. If you dug *Shovel Knight*, or just enjoy a challenging puzzle in general, don't skip out on this one.

—Joseph Luster

The Numbers Game

HELLO FELLOW OTAKU! Each year, society becomes more aware of how important mental health is. We've gotten increasingly comfortable with openly discussing mental-health issues, helping to educate and heal many people. Unfortunately, this topic is still not spoken of enough within the cosplay community. Cosplaying is a fun hobby that anyone can get involved in, but there are some aspects to cosplaying that can be challenging to one's mental stability.

Cosplay and the internet have become inseparable because social media has become a pivotal way to show off creations to a vast audience. While this has helped increase the popularity of cosplaying in general, it has led to some consequences beyond the known presence of online bullies, such as competitiveness, jealousy, and burnout. So how does a cosplayer deal with all of these pressures and voices in their head? By being self-aware and knowing when and how to take a step back and reassess.

Social-media pages are a wonderful way to display your work but can also lead to feelings of competitiveness in some, especially if focusing too much on follower counts and likes. While numbers can be important for the business aspects of cosplaying, they can sometimes lead to cosplayers hyper-focusing on them, which can lead to frustration, anger and even depression. This constant focus on numbers and algorithms can take a toll on a cosplayer's mental health.

Social media competitiveness can also lead to jealousy as cosplayers see friends or other cosplayers online happy or "successful." The biggest thing to remember is that everyone shows their best sides and times on social media. Let's be honest and admit that the vast majority of photos on social media are manipulated in some way, even if it's just by filtering. So, what you are seeing on social media is carefully curated and not the full picture of anyone's real life.

Competitiveness, jealousy, constantly judging others, and other toxic feelings or actions can lead to negative personal feelings of inadequacy and depression, leading some to experience burnout. Many feel the need to constantly produce new cosplays, posts, and other content to keep up with social-media demands, leading them to give up on cosplaying entirely. Sometimes this may be the best course of action for someone to truly get back to a centered state, but there are ways to prevent this from happening in the first place.

First, don't focus so much on numbers and social media. Social media is a business, and their algorithms are meant to drive you to worry and purchase ads (which do almost nothing); don't fall for it!

Second, if you find yourself spending too much time looking at other cosplay pages and feeling jealousy or inadequacy, stop looking at the pages. This may mean unfollowing for a bit so you aren't seeing posts from feeds that might cause negative feelings.

Third, if you need to, step away and take a break from social media entirely. Take some time to refresh yourself and remember what made you love cosplay in the first place. Your followers will always be there when you come back.

Because overall, cosplay should be about having fun, and if it isn't fun anymore, it's time to think about why and how to fix that.

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SonSon Photography



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Brian Ngai Photography



Eternal Cosplay
Appreciation



First Glance
Photography



Limited Aperture



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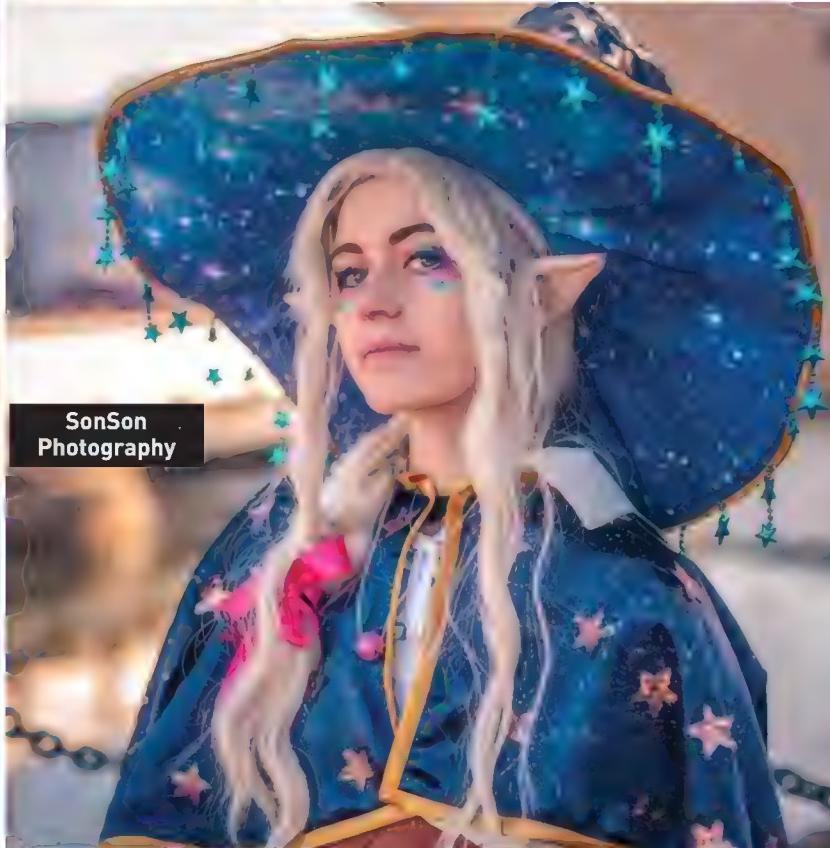
Eternal Cosplay Appreciation



Eternal Cosplay Appreciation



Limited Aperture





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Is Binge Watching Fresh Anime the Way Forward?

Watch all at once, or one at a time?

Binge watching anime is a blessing and a curse. Can't wait for the next episode? You don't have to! Don't have time to watch everything right now? You don't have to! It's like going into your home video collection, but for stuff that's out right now. And at least one major streaming company has made it their go-to model for new shows.



Deep in the weeds of digital entertainment, though, the novelty has worn off a little. Simulcasting remains the favored format for new anime, and even original streaming titles are heading back to weekly releases.

But the binge model for new anime is, inevitably, primed to continue to fail.

Twitter Is the New Water Cooler

Before binge watching was even a twinkle in a producer's eye, we had water cooler TV. These shows required you to be caught up each week, so you could take part in conversations in your social group. But water cooler TV has always had another purpose: maintaining relevance. When your viewers are comparing notes every week, your name is always in the air.

Short of one-and-done digital film releases, single-day drops endanger that "water cooler" feeling online. Without something new to talk about every week—and without a landmark for what will be foremost in each viewer's mind—keeping social media hype alive becomes increasingly difficult. That's not a problem for fans: they can just chat with people as far along as they are. But encouraging viewers to binge ASAP takes your name out of the air months early.



There Is No Shortage of Anime to Marathon

There are two super-great things about anime viewing today: not only can we watch new shows as they air, but we can also finally see older shows. Just about any streaming subscription will now give you access to hundreds of hours of classics, to fulfill those binge-watching needs.

With a whole history of anime becoming increasingly open to us, we already have stacks of shows to chain-smoke. And a lot of those are a matter of playing catch-up to long-running series. If someone wants to watch ten hours of

anime all at once (and who doesn't?), the stacks are already high enough.

We've Been Trying to Escape Binge Watching Anime for Decades

The idea of seeing shows on the day—in the moment—is a dream come true. Short of *Pokémon* and other sure things, you used to have to wait until shows were over before even thinking about a license. Then, short of televised titles, you waited around for home video releases.

The whole trajectory of the modern anime industry has been a move to escape that. 20 years ago, before same-day streaming, fansubbers aimed to have a tighter turnaround than any other group. Older, less urgent series work well as catalogue titles and slow watches. But trying to force new anime into the schedule we're trying to leave in the dirt ... well, doesn't always work.

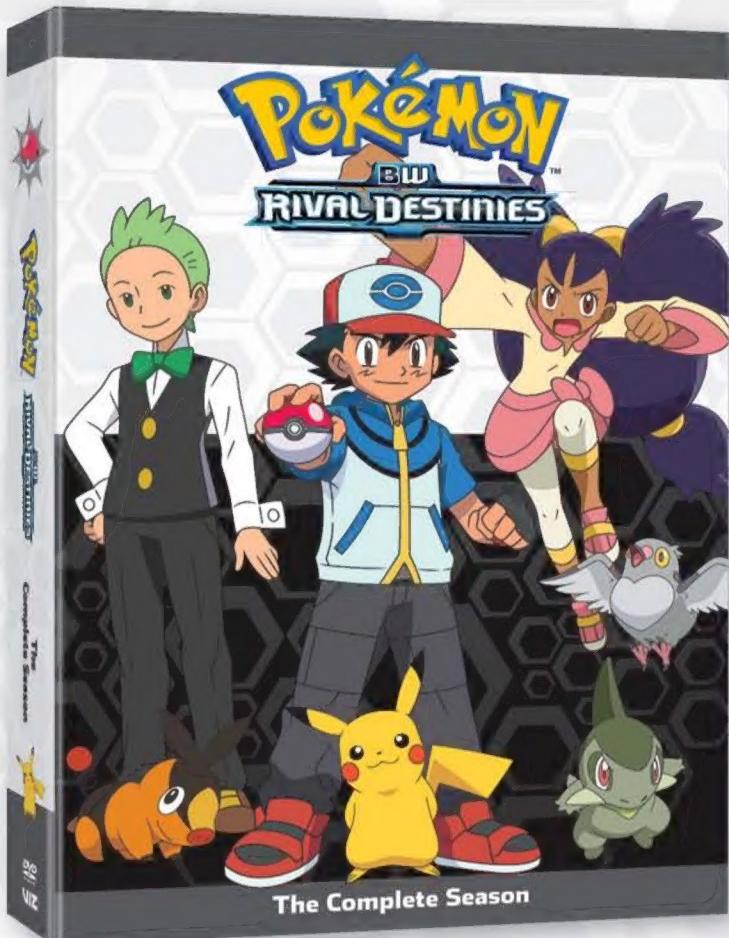
Neither binge watching nor simulcasting is going anywhere, for better or for worse. Neither can kill each other as long as there's a demand for either. But in terms of fresh anime, it might be time to stop trying to make binge watching happen.

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